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The family in Tocqueville's "Democracy in America": Understanding difference in the age of equality

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THE FAMILY IN TOCQUEVILLE'S *DEMOCRACY IN AMERICA*

Understanding Difference in the Age of Equality

BY

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A.B. Wheaton College, 1998

THESIS

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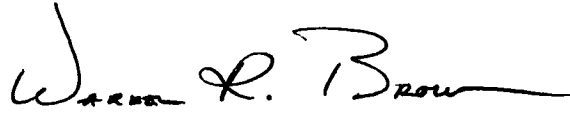
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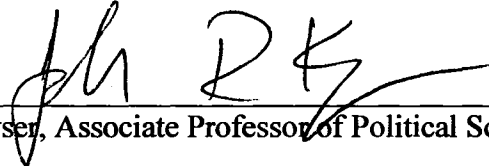
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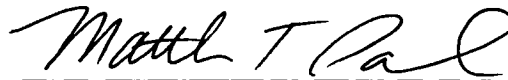
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PREFACE

“It must be acknowledged that equality, which brings great benefits into the world, nevertheless suggests to men some very dangerous propensities. It tends to isolate them from one another, to concentrate every man’s attention upon himself; and it lays open the soul to an inordinate love of material gratification.”

Alexis de Tocqueville

From May 1831 until February of the following year, Alexis de Tocqueville chronicled a watershed moment of human history. He had come to America, a country born of will and chance, whose nation had matured unmolested by the democratic revolution that had propelled his native France into an early adolescence and spawned unforeseen dangers of a new age. For Tocqueville, America was the germ of equality, the inspiration for a global movement towards democratic society; under democracy, equality of condition was quickly supplanting old paradigms of aristocratic life with such force that, to obstruct it, Tocqueville remarked, would be to challenge the will of God himself (1:7). Thus, it was in America where he hoped to find the keys to successful democracy, for the ultimate fate of the new age remained unwritten. While it opened vast new fields to progress and liberty, it also hid endemic dangers from all but the keenest minds. Fortunately for us, Tocqueville was among the latter.

Nearly all who read it find *Democracy in America* (hereafter *Democracy*) insightful and surprisingly prescient. Many credit Tocqueville with predicting the American Civil War—and more notably the Cold War—as well as numerous characterizations of democratic life that seem increasingly apropos. Yet, looming beyond these sensational predictions, confirmed by the passage of time, is an undefined but potentially dark end to the dream of America's founders. For those who read him closely, Tocqueville unfolds the hidden cancer of democratic despotism, metastasizing incrementally as the age of equality matures. Presaging liberty's potential demise is the real genius of Tocqueville and the master message of *Democracy*. It is his most urgent, yet most inscrutable lesson for democratic peoples.

Tocqueville's arresting insight has spawned countless questions; the most pressing, perhaps, is whether democracies can avoid the Hobbsian fate towards which they seem ineluctably drawn. I do not know, nor do I presume to understand the future of democracy better than Tocqueville, even with the advantage of modern history. My intuition, however, is that we cannot. Despite such pessimism, I am drawn to Tocqueville's message if for no other reason than to better grasp the vexing predicaments in which America increasingly finds herself.

In the introduction to *Democracy*, Tocqueville offers his French readers a metaphor for their then-current democratic condition; "placed in the middle of a rapid stream, we obstinately fix our eyes on the ruins that may still be descried upon the shore we have left, while the current hurries us away and drags us backward towards the abyss" (1: 7). He enjoins his audience to turn their gaze from the decaying ramparts of aristocracy, downstream to a "new political science" to best guide successful democracy. After centuries of progress, modern democracies are gradually approaching that abyss, and now, ironically, it behooves us to look to the past, upon the courses we have chosen, if we wish to navigate the cataract of despotism that may lie ahead. The wisdom of Tocqueville and the democratic journey he charts for readers is well-suited to that endeavor.

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ABSTRACT

THE FAMILY IN TOCQUEVILLE'S *DEMOCRACY IN AMERICA**Understanding Difference in the Age of Equality*

by

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University of New Hampshire, May, 2007

The American family in Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* presents a novel association to humankind; at its heart are natural bonds between generations, spouses and siblings that offer, through public recognition, new opportunities for both individual and civic improvement. Through an exposition of *Democracy's* American family, this paper addresses how the association helps remediate the greatest dangers of the age of equality: a tyrannical majority, materialism, individualism and ultimately, democratic despotism. It finds that the *chief* virtue of the American family comes from the natural, complementary gender differences that define marriage in American public opinion; in particular, the social recognition that American wives receive supports a level of morality—and political success—that is singular to the Americans and integral to the maintenance of democracy, generally.

CHAPTER I

THE AMERICAN FAMILY IN THE LITERATURE

The insights that Tocqueville brings to the subject of democracy have spawned generations of scholarship, from empirical assessments of his observations to modern rewrites of his original journey.¹ Across this spectrum, scholars acknowledge that Tocqueville saw American democracy in mixed hues; some find his observations sunnier than others, but none suggest his vision was entirely rosy. Since all agree he saw a dark side to democracy—namely the danger of despotism, but also particular worries like materialism—many wonder what securities protect it.

Perhaps the clearest strength of American democracy is its religious foundation, separate from the sphere of political life but instructing its morality so well that Tocqueville named it “the first of America’s political institutions”(1: 316).² While Americans’ commercial, intellectual and political lives are molded by an odd pairing of skepticism and innovation, religious dogma is entrenched in their moral constitution. Tocqueville observed that they share universal notions of Christian morality which not only define the boundaries of proper conduct but restrict the purview of doubt. Thus, while Tocqueville’s Americans did not use religion to justify political authority (e.g. divine right of kings, etc.), religion still instructed politics by rendering certain ideas and acts unquestionable. In Tocqueville’s words, “religion exercises but little influence upon

¹ Robert Putnam’s *Bowling Alone* and Bernard-Henri Levy’s recent *American Vertigo* are examples, respectively.

² Hereafter, all references are to *Democracy in America* (Bradley Ed.) Knopf 1945, unless otherwise noted.

the laws and upon the details of public opinion; but it directs the customs of the community and, by regulating domestic life, it regulates the state” (1: 314-15).

A less appreciated, but clearly connected antidote to the dangers of democracy is the democratic family, an ubiquitous institution so peculiar to the American experience that Tocqueville proclaimed “[i]n America, the family, in the Roman and aristocratic signification of the word, does not exist” (2: 202). At the heart of the democratic family was a “natural bond” between its members, a quality of enhanced sympathy and affection unknown in aristocratic times when social hierarchies dictated the formal tenor of relations. Allan Bloom writes, “Nature here is understood as the first movements of the heart unaffected by conventions, which are the source of corruption” (242).

The literature reviewed in this chapter offers nuanced presentations of the American family as it bears on democracy. Notable differences do emerge, yet overall this rather limited group of scholars *interprets* Tocqueville’s meta-message similarly, even if they debate its relevance and details. Specifically, most recognize that Tocqueville saw a pernicious tendency for equality to lead democrats into private, individualistic spheres that discouraged civic engagement. Further, they agree that Tocqueville viewed this habit as slowly suicidal to free societies; the family’s role in this process, however, is less clear. Does the natural family that emerges from the same state of equality somehow offset these dangers? To this point Tocqueville writes, “I do not know, on the whole, whether society loses by the change [from families built upon conventional paternal authority to those secured by natural sympathies], but I am inclined to believe that man individually is a gainer by it” (2: 205). Clearly, the question is worth pursuing.

A handful of scholars address *Democracy's* American family exclusively, while many cite it briefly when discussing other aspects of the book. Of those whose primary focus it is, their scholarship illuminates a few key areas including: the accuracy of Tocqueville's portrayal of domestic life; his faith in the American family as a guardian of liberty; and the relations of the family, with particular focus on the inequality of husband and wife. Here, the debate has focused on the origin, and relative justice, of a conspicuous gender hierarchy that Tocqueville found important for democratic liberty. A few scholars apply Tocqueville's conclusions to democracy today, using him as their scapegoat—or their hero—as they rejoice and lament America's changing mores.

Roger Boesche's *Why Did Tocqueville Fear Abundance?* interprets Tocqueville in a way that most authors share, notably by focusing on his fear of democratic materialism. Boesch argues that Bourgeoisie society, the inevitable product of democracy, holds acquisitiveness at its defining ethic (27). Such a principle threatens democracy by sapping men of the time and energy for anything but private pursuits and by distracting their attention from civic life (Boesch 28-9). On Tocqueville's view, commercial man lacks the time and the inclination to be political, a dangerous prospect for a politics of self-government. Boesch, as well as Alice Behnegar, recognizes a distinction between types of freedom that highlights this danger. Quoting Tocqueville, Boesch writes (31) "So wrong it is to confound independence with liberty. No one is less independent than a citizen of a free state." Unfortunately, as democrats prioritize commerce, they foster habits of self-interest and private independence, not the conscious discipline needed by a free society.³

The view that Tocqueville feared abundance is generally held throughout the literature as is the belief that he saw family as somehow mitigating the threat of individualism. Boesch argues that family, along with five other elements that have roots in the aristocratic age (i.e. community, religion, love of future, mores and laws, work ethic), works to restrain self-interest, yet the precise means whereby this happens is unclear (33). Boesch suggests that this mechanism, so to speak, is the natural bonds of the democratic family which increase affection between its members as their ties to society attenuate (34).

Like Boesch, F.L. Morton notes Tocqueville's fear of individualism and asserts that while religion and enlightened self-interest are widely noticed by scholars, the family is often overlooked as an equally relevant antidote to individualism (309). In *Sexual Equality in the Family in Tocqueville's "Democracy in America"* Morton qualifies Boesch's nod to natural bonds as the family's key virtue, citing the character of the conjugal union, specifically, as a more accurate basis for Tocqueville's praise for the American family.

In highlighting the family's importance to Tocqueville, Morton sums up its influence thus: "He [Tocqueville] argues that the experience of the family.....draws the individual out of his preoccupation with himself and induces a concern for others" (310). The basis for such concern is the couple's 'different-but-equal' status which contradicts intuitive notions of democratic equality. Along with Morton, William Mathie observes that as relative equality replaced the hierarchy of aristocratic families, it reduced the

³ Commercial success is so esteemed by Americans, that Tocqueville recognizes it as the sole repository of honor in America; precisely because it is viewed as necessary for the nation's material success, mercantile courage has replaced military valor as the path to American glory (2: 249-50).

moral authority of the father and removed his guaranteed inheritance, leaving men more dependent (and more focused) on work; necessity superseded virtue as the object of men's attention (317).⁴ But as equality lowered male morality—or at least its priority—it raised women substantially above their aristocratic forbears. They become so significant to liberty that Tocqueville attributes America's success chiefly “to the superiority of its women” (2:319).

The nature of this “superiority” is a key component of the natural family and is often raised by scholars. Most contend that the superiority of which Tocqueville speaks regards morality; some also include intellect (e.g. William Kristol). More importantly, scholars also question whether the assertion compares American to European women, the sexes within America, or both. Morton's interpretation of Tocqueville's claim as the second option is most characteristic of the literature overall. Where this moral superiority originates, however, is less clear. Morton, for example, claims that Tocqueville sees the basis for difference in nature but admits that education is a crucial part of sustaining female morality (324). If it *is* based in nature, he notes, one may ask whether women should become more public if their potential to redeem politics is so great (319).⁵

The sexes different-but-equal status is valued by Tocqueville principally for its political utility, regardless of the origin of female superiority, argue many scholars; specifically, transporting women from the domestic to the public domain would engender a competition between the sexes that mirrored the larger commercial competition within

⁴ Insofar as aristocratic mores relied on the “wisdom of...ancestors”, democracy's tendency to disregard tradition contributed to the loss of patriarchal moral authority, argues Mathie (12).

⁵ Additionally, an interpretation of gender-based female moral superiority also raises the question of whether aristocracies founded on paternalistic values are necessarily inferior to democracies maintained by female virtue.

society, thereby undermining familial duties based on the different-but-equal ethos (Morton 322). Behnegar recognizes that democratic duties are, in fact, based on needs that emerge from marriages that “exaggerate if not create” gender differentiation (346).⁶ Thus, in gaining more direct access to politics, women would lose the very quality (influence) that could make such access beneficial; most agree that Tocqueville prefers that women remain cloistered at home and have a stronger, if less direct influence on politics through the moral instruction of husbands and sons.

For women to instruct men in morals, they must be well suited to the task. As mentioned, some interpret Tocqueville’s faith in female virtue to be based on natural differences between the sexes, but as Morton notes, even Tocqueville believes that relying on nature exclusively, is insufficient (323). Scholars also recognize Tocqueville’s praise for women’s education in America—more open and worldly than that of France—which relied on reason and education to protect female morality.

In early New England, women’s moral education drew on various components of American society of which religion and the principle of enlightened self-interest were foremost. Mathie, and Sanford Kessler argue that female morality was first instructed by the austere mores of the Puritans, but by Tocqueville’s time its influence was owed elsewhere (Mathie 20). Kessler argues that enlightened self-interest became Americans’ attempt to reasonably show how self-interest and public good were synonymous and, in so doing, gave democratic women a basis for moral behavior more convincing than

⁶ Most scholars, Morton and Mathie included, see natural bonds in other family relations (i.e. between father and son and between siblings) as less separate and more equal. Consequently, these relations *do not* support the idea of duties to others, but rather foster a kind of sympathy that characterizes the “natural bond” which between husband and wife allows for a union based on love, but not a marriage based on equality.

religion (254). He writes “Their [Americans] first accomplishment was to institute a system of education which made enlightened self-love rather than religion the primary basis of chastity. This reform became necessary when interest replaced piety as the driving force behind most Americans’ behavior” (258).

At home, William Kristol contends that women employ enlightened self-interest by subordinating themselves to men in marriage and upholding female chastity. In return, they gain the material support needed to raise children and advance society in the process (491). Alice Behnegar claims that by accepting marital inequality, American women “sacrifice ...immediate sensual gratification and...absolute liberty and equality to a long-term, rational interest in “social existence”, in tranquility and in such happiness as her situation allows” (347). This truncated happiness—the final end to which she sacrifices her equality—hints at yet another force instructing female morality, American public opinion.

Tocqueville’s views on American public opinion are hard to miss. Throughout *Democracy*, he refers to its overwhelming power on democrats, influencing everything from doubt to dissent. One of his most famous sections—the “tyranny of the majority”—is devoted to this topic. With respect to morality, Tocqueville praises public opinion as central to its success. His views have not passed unnoticed. Kristol argues that while women employ reason to help decide when and whom to marry, they are also guided by certain “leading ideas” that clarify “the kind of democratic equality that can be established between men and women” (483). Specifically, public opinion supports educated women’s free choice of husbands—a luxury denied aristocratic brides—but it

circumscribes female passion to the realm of partner selection only, excluding the baser indulgences which in men, it tolerates.

Kessler contends that public opinion brought a dual force to bear on the moral consciences of Americans. Its ubiquity came from America's pervasive Christianity, but its real strength is owed to the country's commercial disposition (Kessler 255). He writes, "Americans honored chastity most because it fostered commercial habits, kept families productive, and helped maintain the political stability essential for prosperity" (255). Mathie notes that despite his praise, Tocqueville viewed American public opinion as exceptionally strict; after all, it codified its aversion to sexual license with laws that treated rape as a capital offense (Mathie 16). Mathie agrees with Kessler on the religious and commercial basis for public opinion but adds "what justifies this [conjugal morality], for Tocqueville at least, is not that it is natural or that it serves commerce, but that it preserves liberty in democracy" (29).

These authors argue that insofar as strongly moral women are commercially and politically expedient, Tocqueville felt that society reinforced this disposition through a public that censures, and may even kill transgressors. Such values loomed before educated women, who could see the personal interests that a secure marriage served (e.g. childrearing) as well as the social repercussions that followed impropriety. In sum, Americans' regimen of religion and enlightened self-interest, augmented by public opinion, generated a political culture that supported women's natural moral superiority. Yet, even if Americans managed to sustain *female* virtue, how was morality taught to men? Not surprisingly, through sex, argues Allan Bloom (237).

In *The Relation of the Sexes: Rousseauian Reflections on the Crisis of Our Times*, Bloom interprets Tocqueville vis-à-vis his intellectual predecessor Rousseau and applies Tocqueville's observations to contemporary America where they have acquired new meaning. Bloom argues that Tocqueville saw in the American family the proper manifestation of male sexual desire advanced in Rousseau's novel *Emile* (238). Through conjugal sex, men transform their passions into an end that transcends self-interest in a way that the desire for self-preservation, manifest in commercial life, cannot; sex in marriage produces children (and mothers) whom democratic men come to love in ways inconceivable in business relations (235).

Furthermore, argues Bloom, wives management of sex within marriage, dictates the moral tenor of society. He writes, "What a man must do in order to get sexual satisfaction is central to his conduct and his opinions.....And men's respect for others and for themselves is in large measure fixed by their sentiments in this primary relationship" (239). Insofar as men's susceptibility to instruction presupposes a libido unmatched in women, Bloom finds *natural* differences central to Tocqueville's views on female superiority and to the overall design of civic morality. Not surprisingly, the blurring of gender roles under contemporary egalitarianism, he feels, would be rejected by Tocqueville despite evidence of free choice and reason—qualities he applauds in democratic women. Bloom writes, "The free choice of one marriage has not prevented the demand for the free choice of others. The reason of women has not been persuaded that dedication to the family is their natural lot, or that chastity is a compelling maxim of prudence" (244).

Like Bloom, most scholars imagine little tolerance for current gender equality in the mind of Tocqueville. “My hunch is that he would have thought that we had pretty much derailed ourselves,” writes Jean Elshtain (162). Still, Tocqueville’s relevance to contemporary America is a final and contentious issue within the literature. Despite his appreciation for women’s education, reason, and free choice, he nevertheless seems strongly opposed to modern liberal egalitarianism—specifically, women functioning *as* men with concomitant rights and duties, which begs the question: Are Tocqueville’s views on morality still defensible or have they become relics of an age unrecognizable to modern society and thus inappropriate for its instruction?

For America today, Kessler questions Tocqueville’s predictive relevance on grounds that serious oversights existed in his initial optimism of American morality. Kessler’s first criticism—Tocqueville’s belief that the “democratic forces which liberated American women [education, reason, choice]....could be confined within their established limits” (1989, 259)—is exemplified by Bloom’s observation of the modern penchant for remarriage. Certainly, Tocqueville must not have imagined that women’s early freedom to choose a husband would extend so far as this. Additionally, says Kessler, unseen changes in science (i.e. technological advances and birth control) made gender differentiation less critical to the economy, thereby endangering enlightened self-interest, Tocqueville’s favored principle that squared chastity and female domesticity with progress; moreover, “the old equation of sexual morality and national economic prosperity...no longer holds as the sexual revolution now fuels a significant part of the American economy” (Kessler 1989, 261). Clearly, America changed in ways

inconceivable to Tocqueville, yet scholars still find relevance in his mores, at times with slightly modified justifications.

Like Kessler, Dorothea Wolfson recognizes that the commercial basis for gender differentiation no longer applies, but nevertheless rejects this change as a mandate for pure gender equality. “In his [Tocqueville] day it was the needs of a growing commercial economy that helped keep women in the role of primary care-giver. In our own day, it is only a cultivated awareness that there is something higher than democratic justice that will do so” (Wolfson 207). That “something higher” is human liberty, according to Alice Behnegar.

If Tocqueville accepts the natural moral superiority of American women as well as a subordinate social position whereby they instruct male behavior, he must support a kind of egalitarian inequality. This is possible, argues Behnegar, because “Tocqueville’s real interest is not the difference or inequality between the sexes, but in human greatness or dignity” (Behnegar 347). For Tocqueville, that dignity is personified by women’s recognition that subordination serves her family’s interests (as well as her own), and by the fact that her commitment to something larger than herself comes despite an immediate loss of freedoms. In doing so, American women not only foster but, in fact *constitute*, the kind of human liberty that Tocqueville was after (Behnegar 350).

Behnegar writes, “Human liberty means that one is in thrall neither to oneself (to one’s passions or interests) nor to others (politically or intellectually). It requires self-sacrifice and principled self-assertion, and equality undermines both” (355). Thus, calls by feminists for pure gender equality remain untenable to Wolfson and Behnegar, despite the loss of commerce as an excuse for female subordination. To them, there remains a

higher purpose that this subordination serves—namely, human dignity—and insofar as this dignity recognizes innate gender differences, its priority remains unchanged by conventions.

In *Women, Equality and the Family*, Jean Elshtain does not go so far as to commit women indefinitely to a purely domestic life, but she does recognize the growing dissolution of society and questions whether symmetrical gender roles—the aim of egalitarian feminism—are tenable. Elshtain accurately observes that while women have happily gone forth from the domestic sphere into business and politics, men have not, nor do they seem inclined to return home (162). Consequently, *no one* remains to give moral instruction to children; responding to the consequences of that void will be the state (Elshtain 163). Not surprisingly, William Kristol surpasses Elshtain in his critique of egalitarian feminism, arguing that even mild gender equality invites the democratic despotism feared by Tocqueville. Interestingly, Kristol's argument here relies as much on men's innate aggression and stubbornness as it does women's moral facility. While he shares the accepted view that female morality is expedient to democracy, he also asserts that "male intractability...underlies the love of independence" which is key to preventing the kind of despotism that Tocqueville feared and is compromised by mores that tolerate sexual equality (485). To adequately protect liberty, men must retain their intransigence while staying open to moral instruction by women, possible only if Americans recognize the need for strong morals and marriages based on inequality (491); on Kristol's view, *any* move toward egalitarianism appears to endanger liberty.

Quite the contrary, argues Laura Janara in *Democracy's Family Values: Alexis de Tocqueville on Anxiety, Fear and Desire*. Although she interprets Tocqueville's

observations of the family similarly to others, she does not share their faith in hierarchy's importance to liberty. Janara's argues that both Tocqueville and Americans have an acute fear of democratic chaos which they projected most forcibly onto American girls (567). Absent the distinct stations and predictable duties of aristocracy, Americans seek to reinvent order where equality has excised it from society. Instead of class hierarchies, "they lean on gender relations for ordering democracy" (Janara 560). But female subordination gives men a false—and dangerous—sense of security. Janara believes that by controlling women through education, domestic confinement and public opinion, American men assume that they have somehow "escaped the subjugation they would likely have endured under aristocracy" only to make themselves less vigilant of democratic despotism (Janara 578).⁷ Consequently, conjugal inequality *undermines* rather than protects the free state. On this point, Janara stands in particular opposition to Kristol.

What exactly Tocqueville's conservative mores offer Americans today really is open to speculation. While none can causally link gender equality and moral decay, the decline of the strictly domestic female and the rapid disintegration of the natural family in the latter half of the 20th century (e.g. divorce, single parenthood, alienated youths, etc.) are very real. Yet *even if* empirics supported a connection between absent mothers, delinquency and moral incontinence, very prickly questions of justice and responsibility must be addressed in any serious proposal to re-segregate the sexes. Despite Kristol's

⁷ Janara argues that the subjugation of women supplements existing racial and economic hierarchies that also serve to calm Americans' fears of social chaos, but which also stand in contrast to the democratic impulse for equality (577).

pragmatic and Behnegar's principled justifications for marital inequality⁸, it remains to be shown that justice can indeed exist in such an arrangement. If free choice justifies marital inequality, the force of public opinion makes women's consent to such conditions suspect. Additionally, does a *natural* basis for such inequality necessarily justify restricting women to the family, even if it is expedient? Of course, if justice is achieved by fulfilling one's natural aptitude, as Plato suggests, then democracies are justified, maybe even *obliged*, to return women to the home, granted Tocqueville's accuracy on innate female morality. To modern notions of justice however, why women bear responsibility for morality remains glaringly unanswered. In a liberal democracy, does men's lack of interest in domestic life justify their absence there? No more, it would seem, than women's under conditions of equality and consent. These remain confounding, though vital questions for understanding democratic health but exceed the scope of my project, which aims to interpret rather than apply Tocqueville's position on the American family.

By and large, the literature reviewed here offers a fairly coherent interpretation of Tocqueville's rendering of the family, particularly as it bears on democracy. This understanding holds complimentary gender relations central to women's ability to influence civic life by moralizing husbands and sons. It relies on a view of female morality that Tocqueville saw as natural but which must be protected by education and buttressed by a moralistic public opinion. To scholars, it is clear that Tocqueville thought the family helped preserve liberty, but Tocqueville is less explicit. He does say this: "I do not know, on the whole, whether society loses by the change [from families built upon

⁸ These are: women have more to gain from marriage than men, and, married women exemplify human dignity, respectively.

paternal authority to those secured by natural sympathies], but I am inclined to believe that man individually is a gainer by it” (2: 205). This assertion leaves unanswered the precise nature of the family’s contribution to democratic health. It is this omission that guides the present research.

In *Democracy* Tocqueville aims to understand how equality has changed the family. By considering these changes in light of democracy’s chief dangers, my research considers the converse. It does not seek to empirically confirm or refute the domestic scene of which Tocqueville writes, nor his predictions; its purpose is to re-examine what Tocqueville says—and doesn’t say—about equality’s effect on the family and show what these changes may have in store for democratic society. Leading this effort will be the following research question: *In what ways does the American family, as viewed by Tocqueville in Democracy in America, remediate the worst dangers of democratic equality?* Hopefully, this query will add insight to an understudied aspect of Tocqueville’s message so that readers may draw more informed lessons on democracy from the author’s wisdom.

CHAPTER II

*DEMOCRACY'S AMERICAN FAMILY: AN INTERPRETATION***Two Nations Under God**

It is not hard to imagine why the family is an instructive if not somewhat distant portal from which to descry political life; the two have been an inseparable pair since ancient times.⁹ Historically, family served as an extension of political administration whereby fathers functioned as intermediaries between dependent citizens and the state. In America, the institution makes a strong, and I believe central, appearance in the earliest formation of the nation. A close reading of *Democracy* reveals the primacy of family to the overall health of democratic life; it is this association wherein children learn mores that begin their political socialization, and spouses reciprocate duties that define the character, and the limits of their public and private lives. It is unsurprising then, that Tocqueville remarks on the family throughout *Democracy*—most obviously in his chapter addressing equality's novel effects on the association—despite his silence on the reciprocal effects that changes to family have on society. Regardless of this omission, family may be the very *best* place to begin to understand political life, given Tocqueville's view of the explanatory power of origins, and the role family played in the nation's formation.

In the early chapters of *Democracy*, Tocqueville introduces his readers to the Americans by way of analogy. He remarks that if one truly wants to know the human

⁹ The family in Aristotle's *Politics* is a good example of the attention paid to this connection in antiquity.

soul, one must necessarily survey the formative infancy that has shaped the man before us (1:28); so too is the case with nations. Regarding the importance of origins, Tocqueville's historical method places special (but not exclusive) emphasis on the circumstances of America's birth.¹⁰ The passions and predilections of her first immigrants; their humors and handicaps; their reception in the new world; even the conflicts that drove them from the European main, must all be reconciled in any fair account of the 19th century nation. In America's case, these generative factors were notably peculiar, for she became two nations, divided at birth.

Conceived from a similar paternity but nurtured by a different mothering hand, two foundings grew into starkly different, almost contrary peoples, divided by purpose and constitution. By Tocqueville's day, the two remained estranged, raising cousins of a common, but distant ancestry that grew obscured with time. Though unsure of the outcome, Tocqueville knew that such a protracted division was unsustainable; America would one day demand a unified, or dominant, heritage. The historic fratricide that proved Tocqueville's fears solved the question of America's cultural bloodline. Interestingly, early in *Democracy*, Tocqueville accurately presages the infirmity that would accompany this death.

The nations mentioned above are America's first colonies of Virginia and Massachusetts, respectively. They shared a common English heritage but retained definitive differences that their peoples carried with them to the New World. With respect to the colonies' chief objectives, as well as their inhabitants, these differences were stark.

¹⁰ A nation's fate, Tocqueville argues, is a product both of historical circumstance and human will, despite that democrats tend to emphasize the former at the expense of the latter (2:91).

Tocqueville asserts that colonies, generally, are foremost places of exile and adventure, where misconduct or misfortune leads men by necessity (2:32). On these counts, Virginia was unexceptionable. Carved from a leading passion of the time, the promise of gold brought scores of mercenaries and misfits to the Virginia coast in search of instant fortune (1:31). “No lofty views, no spiritual conception, presided over the foundation of these new settlements,” writes Tocqueville (2:31). To the British, Virginia was the earliest Wild West and as such, it attracted a certain brand of pioneer whose swashbuckling entrepreneurial legacy, though self-destructive, managed to survive in spirit if not in practice. Oddly, Virginia had the greater success of its prudent rival to the north—the Massachusetts colony—to thank for this.

Though Tocqueville admits that America takes her commercial habits from Virginia, the balance of her culture comes from Puritan roots. In contrast to the mercenary ends of the Virginia founding, Massachusetts was settled for the “triumph of an idea,” namely religious freedom (1:33). This key difference helped ensure the colony’s early survival by unifying thought and action toward a shared purpose; its ultimate success, however, was a matter of demographics. “The other colonies,” writes Tocqueville, “had been founded by adventurers without families; the immigrants of New England brought with them the best elements of order and morality; they landed on the desert coast accompanied by their wives and children” (1:33). Thus, while the first difference between the colonies resided in their ends—fortune in Virginia’s case, liberty in Massachusetts’—it was the divergent peoples who pursued these dreams (i.e. bands of

men versus ordered families, respectively) who proved definitive to New England's cultural survival.¹¹

To be clear, the Puritans' ideological victory was enabled not by gender diversity *per se*, but by habits that only families could foster. It is questionable whether a New England colony demographically alike Virginia could have survived despite the piety of its founding fathers, for on Tocqueville's view, women form a singular connection to morality that eludes even the most devoted bachelors.¹² In concert with men in families, women offered the best medium for a successful transfer of religious mores to society through the moral education of children. "[Religion] directs the customs of the community, and, by regulating domestic life, it regulates the state," writes Tocqueville (1:315). This connection was exemplified by the early laws of New England, which aimed to preserve female virtue, in particular, among community morals generally.

Citing the Connecticut Code of 1650, Tocqueville highlights the severity with which early Americans proscribed license; along with blasphemy, adultery and rape were capital crimes while premarital sex was subdued, when not by marriage, with fines and whippings—punishments similar to those for idleness, drunkenness and lying (1:39-40). Despite these strong constraints on moral behavior, political laws ensured a surprising field of positive freedoms including: education, self-government, trial by jury and

¹¹ That Massachusetts survived Virginia ideologically did not mean the latter's complete demise. In fact, Massachusetts became a surrogate for Virginia's commercial instincts. As New England values secured a future for the American nation, the whole of her cultural genome accompanied this survival; the traits of Southern commerce passed silently to each generation of Americans.

¹² He writes "Religion is often unable to restrain man from the numberless temptations which chance offers; nor can it check that passion for gain which everything contributes to arouse; but its influence over the mind of woman is supreme, and women are the protectors of morals" (1:315).

publicly accountable leaders, among other franchises (1:41, 43). This combination of moral discipline and political liberty was not coincidental; the Puritans did not simply chance upon the key to political freedom by virtue of the piety of their social experiment. Their understanding of religion's role in freedom was advanced, and it was for political exigencies as much as for spiritual aesthetics that they pursued the stringency of their governing laws.¹³

From his perspective on the state of affairs in 1831, Tocqueville admired the political acumen with which the Puritans codified their moral precepts. He writes, "Nothing can be more curious or more instructive than the legislation of that period (early 17th century); *it is there that the solution of the great social problem which the United States now presents to the world is to be found* [italics added]"(1:38). What he means by this "great social problem" is unclear; however, considering the diagnostic aim of his treatise, this problem is likely the paradox of liberal democracy: as freedom ripens under equality, democrats acquire certain habits that soon reach a point of diminishing returns.¹⁴ At this point appear two discrete, yet unequal choices for the retention of liberty. Under the first, man can impose moral self-discipline in return for both political liberty and the modest material, intellectual and spiritual freedoms afforded by public tranquility. Less appealing to Tocqueville, his habits of excess may necessitate submission to an external authority who curtails the former liberty to preserve a modicum of the latter.¹⁵ The Puritan "solution"—which Tocqueville praises—follows the former path; through a

¹³ The best example of this view is a passage from a speech by John Winthrop, stressing the importance of subjection to religious authority in pursuit of political, or in Winthrop's view, moral liberty (1:45).

¹⁴ The most prominent of these dangers are treated vis-à-vis the family in Chapters III, IV and V.

¹⁵ At the risk of oversimplification, one may consider here the state in Hobbes's *Leviathan* in which men abjure the right to self-government in exchange for a public tranquility conducive to the pursuit of property.

shared commitment to religious morality, made relevant by the presence of families and secured by strict punitive laws, the Puritans achieved political self-rule accompanied by certain private freedoms. In this way, communities of New England families sustained the kind of free society that Virginia's all-male colony simply could not. Moreover, they won the cultural spoils of an early conflict between avarice and discipline and from their values built the fledgling republic. Family was thus America's first savior and should be given close attention when studying *Democracy's* Puritans. Whether family remained so consequential by Tocqueville's time is another question. The answer lies in how well the changes to family met the concomitant challenges of American society as it grew out of Puritan New England.

The Natural Family

It is difficult to compare the republic of Tocqueville's time with the textbook renditions from which he takes his views on colonial life.¹⁶ Since two-hundred years of change divides them, modern readers must not conflate the colonial family and the Jacksonian families of 1831; simply sharing the past does not make them coeval. Although Tocqueville found Puritan mores in the families he came to know, a radical transformation underway in America made their birthrights of order and piety uncertain.¹⁷ At the time he wrote, equality's effect on family was kept to reasonable limits, yet Tocqueville feared that if extended, radical equality could undermine the same characteristics of family that made it one of America's strongest defenders of liberty.

¹⁶ The source named in this particular reference is *Hutchinson's History* (1:38, 39).

¹⁷ In *Tocqueville's Puritans: Christianity and the American Founding*, Sanford Kessler argues that the basis for what appeared to be 19th century Puritan chastity was in fact secular, not religious (780).

Tocqueville suggests that a true account of the family begins with the social and political conditions of life under which Jacksonian Americans live. These conditions have a formative effect on their thoughts, actions and sentiments, which in turn shape the character of democratic institutions (2:207). With this observation, Tocqueville begins his major consideration of family life in *Democracy*, his chapter examining the respective effects of hierarchy and equality on family relations. Since the chief aim of this paper is to examine the converse—how the family reciprocates an influence on the overall health of democratic society—an accurate rendering of this institution is key.

On Tocqueville's view, the greatest change to family in the democratic age concerns paternal authority. In aristocratic times, the father's mandate was both political and natural, as the authoritative weight of wisdom, age and experience augmented his position as an intermediary between his dependents and the state (2:204); nobles relied on him to ensure obedience and loyalty from his own family and from the underclass he oversaw. The effect was a father figure "listened to with deference, addressed with respect" and loved not without a modicum of fear (2:204). However, as aristocracy gave way to the democratic age, the family is altered by new conditions of life. Tocqueville mentions three that affect the waning of paternal authority.

The first concerns the overall force of equality of conditions, the reigning ethos of the age. Tocqueville writes, "There are certain great social principles that a people either introduces everywhere or tolerates nowhere" (2:203). Despite Americans' ardent love of freedom, when at odds with equality, even freedom is sacrificed to the latter, more singular characteristic of democratic times; "they call for equality in freedom; and if they cannot obtain that, they still call for equality in slavery," he observes (1:102).

Paradoxically, the primacy that Americans give to equality preserves the danger of tyranny in the future of democratic society.¹⁸ Indeed, Tocqueville's greatest fear, the democratic despot lording over a citizenry equal foremost in their subservience, stems from an excessive love of equality.¹⁹ Not surprisingly, the ubiquity of shared experiences under equality renders "the general notion of a superior...weaker and less distinct" (2:204). As this perspective extends into the family, it challenges the mandate of paternal authority.

Following the overall deepening of equality throughout American life, a second major change enervating paternal rule comes from equality's particular effect on the intellect.²⁰ As the *general* aversion to authority begins to affect the domain of thought, intellectual authority (i.e. Truth) becomes exclusively that knowledge attained by the "individual effort of [each man's] understanding" (2:4).²¹ While there is a brief period during which children rely on parental knowledge, independence and experience quickly supplant tradition as accepted means of education. Consequently, adolescent children become their parents' equals and assume the dispositions proper to such a relationship.

¹⁸ In a passage evocative of Hobbes's *Leviathan*, Tocqueville writes "A kind of equality may even be established in the political world though there should be no political freedom there. A man may be the equal of all his countrymen save one, who is master of all without distinction and who selects equally from among them all the agents of his power" (2:100).

¹⁹ The tension and complexity of equality's relationship to liberty is far too great to be adequately treated here. Suffice it to say that this relationship should not be forgotten when reading Tocqueville's often circumspect opinion on equality's effect on American life.

²⁰ For a detailed discussion of this topic, see Chapter III.

²¹ An interesting issue that emerges from this observation is whether democratic wisdom can ever reach the potential heights of that in ancient, less skeptical ages; under the democratic paradigm of discovering truth, man is necessarily limited by his intellectual abilities which, of course, vary widely from person to person. Since within democracies, the only other intellectual authority besides one's self is public opinion—an aggregate of individual opinions—there appears to be a dumbing down of truth, as all are disinclined to accept the wisdom of another, no matter his intellectual superiority.

From this position, ancestral norms, among other forms of knowledge, are seen “as useless and inconvenient veils placed between them and the truth” (2:5). Thus, adding to the general aversion to superiority under conditions of equality are independent habits of mind which devalue tradition and, consequently, weaken the role of fathers as couriers of ancestral norms (2:205).

Paternal authority is finally compromised by the third (and on Tocqueville’s view, greatest) precipitant of egalitarianism—the division of landed property. While estates were transferred for centuries down aristocratic family lines, property is routinely divided under each generation of democrats. As children inherit increasingly smaller parcels of land, multi-generational families cohabitate by necessity, with greater frequency (2:205). In doing so, they share circumstances and sympathies that make sharp divisions of authority out of place and impractical (2:205). The net effect of these changes is a removal of the conventions that united aristocratic kin, replaced by novel opportunities for affection and intimacy between, and within, generations, based on shared experience.²² The sum result is a preponderance of the democratic or, so-called natural, family.

In the chapter outlined above, Tocqueville details the changes that precipitate a decline in paternal authority as aristocratic paradigms of family succumb to growing equality of conditions. Yet throughout *Democracy*, he never explicitly compares the families of 1831—Jacksonian families—to those of Puritan times. Since he finds the key to free societies in America’s colonial past (recall Tocqueville’s italicized quote on page

²² For reasons similar to those previously mentioned, a transformation paralleling that between fathers and sons occurs between siblings. Whereas aristocratic brothers are tied by interests but divided by order of birth, democratic siblings have a natural affinity for each other despite sometimes idiosyncratic personal interests (2:206).

three) it is worth considering the Jacksonian family relative to its Puritan predecessor as well as its aristocratic forbear. Though sketchy, such a comparison begins to trace the changes to family across two hundred years of unfettered democracy, a trajectory that adds perspective to the nature and influence of *Democracy's* American family.²³ To this end, the three changes weakening paternal authority are considered in turn, as they existed among the Puritans, beginning with the overall character of the “great social principle” of equality.

Although the Puritans evinced a kind economic, educational and class uniformity that distinguished them from other colonists (1:32), the greatest mark of Puritan equality regards the nature of the authority to which this new generation of Americans subjected themselves. By Tocqueville’s time men were equal under the civil laws of the day which recognized each person individually, and held him accountable to “the general laws of the community” (2:204).²⁴ However, while the Puritans’ laws governed the whole community with equal severity, it was the authority of God, not the authority of man that they recognized. His authority was reflected in their public statutes which left no room for choice in religion and moral behavior. Moreover, despite the equality confirmed by the Protestant worldview—specifically, its emancipation from religious hierarchy (Kessler 1992, 783)²⁵—the Puritans relied heavily on customs that were especially

²³ Tocqueville asserts that America is the single nation where one can study the effects of democracy in its purest form, where democracy has “reached its natural limits” (1:14); by contrast, French democracy remains a product of a revolution against aristocracy.

²⁴ Interestingly, popular sovereignty, the guiding principle behind his subjection to these laws, was the “chief Puritan contribution to our political life” argues author Sanford Kessler (1992, 784).

²⁵ The specific reference here is to the Protestant principle of *Sola Scriptura* which gave final interpretive authority to Biblical scriptures themselves over their interpretation by the ecclesiastical hierarchy of the Catholic Church; the implication, of course, is the spiritual independence championed by Martin Luther.

hierarchical to maintain the order that they believed God expected at home, at church and in government (Morgan 19). Thus, despite *Democracy's* limited references to Puritan equality, this generation of Americans appeared equal, foremost, in their obedience to God and under the “just and equal laws” with which they used to govern themselves to this end (1:36).²⁶ Yet in social relationships, “the Puritans were no levelers” (Morgan 18).

The extension of equality across secular society becomes more apparent when we consider more specific measures of equality between the two generations of Americans. Independence of mind, for example—the second notable force that Tocqueville sees transforming the family—is easier to gauge in 17th century New England. Though Tocqueville does not speak to this topic directly, two references to the Connecticut Code of 1650 are telling. Along with the crimes of rape and adultery, “an outrage offered by a son to his parents” was a capital crime (1:39). In the 19th century, by comparison, Tocqueville observed that, “the language addressed by a son to his father [was] always marked by mingled freedom, familiarity and affection” (2:206), while the American girl “has scarcely ceased to be a child when she already thinks for herself, speaks with freedom and acts on her own impulse” (2:208).

For the Puritans, religious faith and morals were strictly excluded from the domain of independent thought. Tocqueville observes that the chief aim of their legislation was to maintain “orderly conduct and good morals” such that the laws “constantly invaded the domain of conscience” (1:39); for example, the preamble to the

²⁶ A good example of the relationship between the political means (e.g. laws, ordinances, etc.) used by the Puritans to achieve their religious ends (i.e. the “glory of God”) can be found in the Act with which the Puritans dedicated the establishment of their colony (2:36).

Connecticut Code of 1650 declares “whosoever shall worship any other God than the Lord shall surely be put to death” (1:39). Nearly two centuries later however, the consequence for blasphemy had tempered with the deepening of intellectual freedom. Tocqueville recalls an incident during his stay in New York when a court witness publicly denied the existence of God and was simply dismissed when the judge found no precedent for such a belief as a legitimate basis for testimony (1:317). However limited the evidence, these cases suggest that by Tocqueville’s time equality had strengthened its hold on American habits of thought, and relaxed the dogma that had precluded it from Puritan minds.

The final factor weakening paternal authority, the division of property, can be well imagined with respect to the Puritans. Tocqueville states precisely that entail—the aristocratic law ensuring a complete transfer of property to a single heir upon his father’s death—was only formally abolished around the time of the Revolution (1:53). Prior to this, according to Tocqueville, “the colonies followed the English law of entail” (2:369). Since this formal shift in inheritance law is well-documented, the Puritans’ collection of property can be assayed with confidence.

Because labor, not land, was scarce in the colonies, large estates were not uncommon. To what extent early New England families accumulated land is difficult to know, although it was probably less than that of their Virginian counterparts—given the importance of southern agriculture—but surely more than that of Jacksonian families, since entail was repealed in 1786. In sum, while the first Puritans obviously began colonial life without inherited land, a continent open to cultivation and laws that passed property intact between generations must have quickly changed this fact. Thus, until the

abolition of entail, American families appeared aristocratic with respect to land inheritance. Moreover, save for the very earliest Puritans, necessity, if not choice, must not have brought them together in the same kind of proximity that Tocqueville found in 1831.

The Jacksonian family alongside its Puritan predecessor presents an interesting comparison, however a definitive treatment is beyond the scope and tangential to the aim of this paper. Moreover, the observations drawn from Tocqueville are made tentative by a very limited consideration of the Puritan family in *Democracy*. What seems reasonably apparent, however, is that equality of conditions' specific effects on judgment and inheritance, and possibly its ubiquity in American society generally, was less prominent in Puritan New England than in the America that Tocqueville saw. Thus, assuming the accuracy of equality's perceived effects on the family, we can be fairly sure that Puritan fathers retained a kind of moral authority reminiscent of aristocratic families, a trait that had diminished by Tocqueville's time. For the purposes of this paper, the relevant question becomes: How did this loss affect the moral discipline that Tocqueville found germane to the success of the New England colonies and to the maintenance of free societies generally?

Difference, Equality and Justice in American Marriage

Tocqueville's praise for colonial life centered largely on its attention to morals which instructed political habits that in turn, supported freedom. In the Puritans' case, the presence of ordered families inspired New Englanders to codify religious mores into punitive laws that ensured this relationship. However, as equality began to compromise the father's stewardship of tradition, how did morality remain complementary to politics?

Given equality's increasing force on the American family, it seems likely that any change to the conjugal union would mirror those between parent and child, yet its effect on marriage was not the kind of leveling observed between fathers and sons. Rather, equality was manifested in marriage such that both sexes were raised by keeping them distinct. In doing so, 19th century Americans recognized equality by placing women in positions of moral influence predicated on their absence from politics (and public life generally) and their subordination to husbands. Interestingly, the novelty of subordinate females instructing civic morality resonated with Tocqueville for its normative value as well as its political wisdom. On his view, equally *valued* gender roles without equal rights and duties, was essential to both the future of American democracy and to nature's sense of justice.

As he begins his observations of the equality of the sexes, Tocqueville makes clear that equality exerted an influence on married couples as strongly as it did elsewhere in society. He writes "I believe that the social changes that bring nearer to the same level superiors and inferiors will raise women and make her more and more the equal of men" (2:222). He points out however, that equality's effect on American marriage takes a notably different form. Within the parent/child and the sibling relationships, natural bonds are accompanied by decreased hierarchy, weakened authority and a robust and early independence; between spouses however, equality naturalizes the conjugal union—basing it on love and choice instead of interests—without compromising the moral and physical distinctions between the sexes. This unique rendering of sexual equality is highlighted by the difference between gender relations in America and France.

What best distinguishes the American wife from her French counterpart is her relative social value, seen in the respective institutions of education and marriage. Among the Americans, Tocqueville notes two aspects of society, religion and commerce—the legacies of America’s dual founding—that explain the importance of women in American public opinion; Americans’ faith in women’s natural moral capacity inclines them to respect and protect female virtue, while the country’s commercial instincts demand a high degree of public tranquility which begins with an orderly, settled home life (2:212). Both priorities are achieved by sequestering American wives at home, a potentially challenging task in an age of equality, but one facilitated by the uniquely democratic education of American girls (2:212).

Unlike French women, educated in much the same “reserved, retired and...conventional” way as in aristocratic times, American women are empowered to use their own reason and independence to navigate the unique challenges of democratic womanhood, perhaps most importantly, the novel task of choosing a husband (2:210).²⁷ In fact, it is the self-knowledge and discipline of her education that helps the young American woman accept the subordinate role of domestic wife and mother, cast upon her by public opinion once she married (2:213).²⁸ Moreover, by submitting herself to the dictates of public opinion she exhibits a kind of feminine courage, distinct from the

²⁷ The reader will recall that until very recently, marriages were based on interests, not love, and female choice was virtually unknown. Countless examples of proscribed love affairs, from the timeless *Romeo and Juliet* to the contemporary *Aladdin* remind us of this fact.

²⁸ Tocqueville writes “When the time for choosing a husband arrives, that cold and stern reasoning power which has been educated and invigorated by the free observation of the world teaches an American woman that a spirit of levity and independence in the bonds of marriage is a constant subject of annoyance, not of pleasure....and that the sources of a married woman’s happiness are in the home of her husband” (2:213).

commercial boldness of men, but no less recognized by society at large.²⁹ Such public approbation remains a testament to American wives' important place in Jacksonian America, albeit one dissimilar to their husbands'. French women, by contrast, educated to be ignorant if not suspicious of themselves, learned nothing of such courage, for they were not expected to "sacrifice...[their] pleasures to [their] duties" the way American women were, which of course they did not (2:212). Tocqueville believes that the social consequence of such an education is often an ill-conceived and chaotic marriage that stems from its inability to meet the demands of newly democratic society, particularly the need for domestic order in which men and boys find peace, recognize duties, and gain moral edification which they take into the public arena (1:315).

By fostering a settled home life, Tocqueville believes that gender differentiation supports American morals much like class hierarchy fostered sacrifice in aristocratic ages; moreover, it does so within the normative ethos of its time—the mandate of equality. In each case, Tocqueville appears to recognize the unifying power of difference; that is, by excluding some part of society from the social experience of the other—serfs from nobles in aristocracy, women from men in America—difference was retained as a basis for *duties* as well as *rights*, a division that Tocqueville found essential to the maintenance of order and propriety (2:223).³⁰ In America, the non-competitive nature of gender relations helped men retain a commitment to something other than self-interest (i.e. family) and gave women an influential forum in which to exercise their

²⁹ The best example of female courage can be found in "Appendix U" of the Bradley version of *Democracy* (2:381).

³⁰ See Concluding Thoughts section for a more detailed discussion of difference in democracy.

moral strength. Consequently, both sexes reaped the salutary effects of difference.³¹ In sum, as the Puritans' punitive laws and the moral suasion of fathers faded under deepening equality of conditions, Americans relied on the heightened importance of women as domestic moral educators to replace the piety and self-discipline of colonial times.³² This feat was accomplished by the sharp division of the genders in marriage.

Tocqueville's admiration for American marriage and its supporting ethos of equality through difference is explicit; in fact, his (arguably) strongest claim in *Democracy* concerns this unique institution. He writes, "If I were asked....to what the singular prosperity and growing strength of [Americans] ought mainly to be attributed, I should reply: *To the superiority of their women* (italics added)" (2:225). Understandably, such a bold statement has not gone unnoticed by scholars.³³ However, the view that "superiority" here denotes a comparison of morals by gender (i.e. that American women

³¹ The value of democratic difference—even hierarchy—is supported by Tocqueville's cautionary view of its converse, equality: "It is not the equality of condition that makes men immoral and irreligious: but when men, being equal, are also immoral and irreligious, the effects of immorality and irreligion more easily manifest themselves, because men have but little influence over each other..." (2:384).

³² This observation merits further analysis on two points: the loss of piety and the changing roles of women from Puritan to Jacksonian America. On the former point, Tocqueville shows that while the Puritans were constantly observing God—from the hierarchy of their social relations to the biblical mandates of their civil laws—Jacksonian Americans more consistently separate religion from civil society, which they leave just only once a week, on Sundays, to return to church where "the soul resumes possession and contemplation of itself" (2:152). When it comes to the role of women, the new influence of Jacksonian wives signals an equalizing of the sexes (albeit an incomplete one) that far surpasses the gender hierarchies of the Puritans. Though Tocqueville is inexplicit on the role of Puritan women, historians portray them as sharply subordinate to husbands who instructed them in nearly all matters, but *especially* religion (Morgan 44). This contrast to *Democracy's* 19th century moral matriarch reflects the deepening effect of equality, even upon views of God and nature; nineteenth century Americans accepted innate intellectual parity between the sexes, while Puritan customs held women to be, by nature, physically and intellectually inferior. Although Puritan wives were protected from abuse and commands contradictory to the civil laws of their community, their duties were strictly domestic (Morgan 45); she was—if we are to believe the sermons of the day—to "guid[e] the house [and] not guid[e] the Husband" (Morgan 43). To appreciate the importance of gender order in Puritan society, we might consider the case of Ann Hutchinson, who was banished from Massachusetts after being accused of breaking the Fifth Commandment by acting more as "a Husband than Wife, and a preacher than a Hearer; and a Magistrate than a Subject" (Morgan 19).

³³ See page four of Chapter I for examples.

are morally superior to their husbands) is a misinterpretation. To be fair, such a view is reasonable given Tocqueville's explicit mention of women as the "protectors of morals" and his suggestion that one natural difference between the sexes—moral sense—is owed to women (1:315; 2:222). While these observations are true, they mislead Tocqueville's point which is clarified in context.

Two observations suggest that Tocqueville's claim regards neither the sexes in America nor morality itself. Concerning the latter, since the basis for female morality appears to be nature, French women must possess the same capacity vis-à-vis their husbands as American women do theirs, rendering morality an inappropriate basis to distinguish American women. Adding to the confusion is the following observation made just before Tocqueville's "superiority" claim: "Thus, then, while [Americans] have allowed the social inferiority of woman to continue, they have done all they could to raise her morally and intellectually to the level of man" (2:225). If Tocqueville speaks of gender superiority instead of national character, one wonders why Americans would "raise" a morally (perhaps even intellectually) superior being to the level of an inferior. The idea itself defies good sense, not to mention logic.

Given the interpretive problems of moral or gender superiority, Tocqueville's claim must concern something else. In my opinion, the unique social station of American women, enabled by their precocious education and realized by their respected position in the home, is most likely. Moreover, this reinterpretation follows the spirit of the chapter which compares French and American public opinion and avoids the textual contradictions encountered by the other interpretations of superiority. Most importantly, it is only with an accurate understanding of "superiority" that one can grasp the full

nature of Tocqueville's praise for American marriage—his admiration of its justice as well as its political utility.

That Tocqueville praises difference in an age that ceaselessly works against it raises the issue of justice, an important but often hidden dimension of *Democracy*, a work whose judgment is often overshadowed by its explanatory power, despite Tocqueville's expressed intention to achieve both (2:349); nonetheless, Tocqueville's normative stance on difference and equality in American institutions surfaces throughout and appears to be based on social consequences rather than political utility (*a la* Machiavelli) or, conversely, the achievement of religious idealism (e.g. the aim of Puritan customs); that God is just is simply understood. Thus, Tocqueville views those institutions that favorably affect the human condition as both justifiable and divinely inspired. Contrasting the institutions of marriage and slavery—each characterized by difference and varying degrees of hierarchy—exemplifies this point.

For its virtues of order and moral influence, Tocqueville clearly finds that gender difference in American marriage helps support the commercial and political needs of the nation, yet he also finds that individual human improvement occurs when institutions are instructed by nature. In stratified American marriages, both sexes avail themselves of natural moral and physical differences and are raised in the process (2:222). By contrast, the hierarchy of American slavery exacts a pernicious toll on master, slave and society, writ large. In large part, this degradation stems from the unnatural use of race as a basis for rights and duties.

Tocqueville notes that superiority persists in the minds of slave nations long after the institution itself. In antiquity, such prejudice was mitigated by limited terms of

servitude, after which freed slaves became indistinguishable from masters (1:371). In America however, racial prejudice in the North—sharper and more divisive than in the South—persists because assimilation never follows emancipation (1:373).³⁴ While Southern society remained “more tolerant and compassionate” toward blacks, slavery here fostered different problems of which idleness among masters and brutish ignorance among slaves were chief (1:373, 374, 379, 395).

Both for its promotion of civic stagnation as well as human debasement, Tocqueville denounced the consequences of slavery much as Thomas Jefferson did; and like Jefferson, he believed that God would not overlook this iniquitous practice. In one of Tocqueville’s rare but powerful anecdotes, his notion of providential justice is exemplified. In it, he relates the sad end to an old man who had children with one of his slaves and could not escape the horror of knowing his sons would be sold into slavery upon his death. Tocqueville writes, “when I saw him, he was a prey to all the anguish of despair; and I understand how awful is the retribution of Nature upon those who have broken her laws” (1:396).³⁵ Indeed, no other practice in *Democracy*—save perhaps for the habits of the materialists (see Chapter III)—does Tocqueville find as execrable to humanity as slavery.³⁶

³⁴ One of Tocqueville’s solutions to the problem of slavery is intermarriage, the result being the eventual obliteration of racial distinctions.

³⁵ Another example of Nature’s retributive justice can be found in the illicit relations that plague aristocratic marriages which suffocate the natural love between men and women who wish to marry but cannot (2:216).

³⁶ Moreover, Tocqueville censures each for similar reasons. Slavery degrades man by treating him as chattel, but American slavery goes even deeper, enslaving him, principally, not with chains but through “despotism and...violence against the human mind” (1:395). By being denied an education, and the use of higher faculties of thought through lives of relentless labor, American slaves are not simply stopped from exercising their humanity, they are convinced that it does not exist. In this sense, the ethos of materialism, which denies the existence of the soul, and thus anything beyond the needs of the flesh, *is* slavery.

The consequences of marriage vis-à-vis slavery illustrate how the distinct *effects* of difference and the nature of its foundation—not simply the attribute itself—determines the relative justice of human institutions; foremost for the purposes of this paper are the consequences of the natural family. The question we might ask, then, and one which may help fill Tocqueville’s silence on the natural family’s net effect is: How does Tocqueville assess the consequences of this institution (and others)? The answer appears to lie in how well it meets the needs of different ages, whose people are predisposed towards certain social and political habits of their time (2:153).

In aristocratic ages, both the intransigent poverty of the serf and the opulence of the noble focused attention to spiritual contemplation; the latter men, contented beyond satisfaction, ignored their own material well-being while the poor, though they wished for greater welfare, sought refuge from their misery in the divine and the heavenly (2:153). By contrast, democrats, who live with looser social forms, education, and much closer to a modicum of material comfort, remain forever inclined towards utility and convenience at the expense of the ideal and the spiritual (1:153). Moreover, Tocqueville fears that such habits turn democrats away from their “sublimest faculties” as humans (2:154). To combat such habits, Tocqueville remarks “It should be the unceasing object of the legislators of democracies and of all the virtuous and enlightened men who live there to raise the souls of their fellow citizens and keep them uplifted towards heaven” (2:154). Thus, it is worth considering the ways in which American marriage accomplishes this task.

Reconsidering French and American gender relations from this perspective brings the relative justice of marriage into sharper focus. By virtue of their democratic

character, both societies require strong habits of mind and spirit to combat predilections for physical well-being. On this point, the two societies diverge sharply. The different-but-equal status of American spouses creates “cold but virtuous women instead of affectionate wives and agreeable companions to men” while inspiring a kind of hearty female courage that is unflaggingly loyal (2:211). Interestingly, each of these qualities is derived from the cultivation of the female will and the tempering of physical passions, be they sexual or material.³⁷ This importance of mastering physical desires materializes even in American legislation, which, as shown earlier, has become far milder since Puritan times, save for the prosecution of rape which remained a capital crime in Tocqueville's time (2:225).

By contrast, when French society does in fact punish this crime, it is done with less severity, a product, perhaps, of its conciliatory attitude toward the demands of the body (2:225). French men, for example, portray themselves as the “slaves of women” and “under their despotic sway” yet consider them “seductive but imperfect beings,” while women relish the chance to present themselves as “futile, feeble and timid” (2:224). In both cases, inordinate attention is paid to physicality, the woman, to her presentation as coquettishly helpless, the man, to his inability to resist her seductive display. Both attitudes serve, rather than eschew, sexual desire—the apotheoses of physical gratification and, moreover, what democrats need least.

When it comes to marriage and the genders, American public opinion functions as Tocqueville would have a wise legislator, sanctioning institutions whose habits transcend

³⁷ While modesty clearly follows “cold and virtuous women,” their rejection of material comforts is made clear in Tocqueville's examples of female courage in his chapter *The Young Woman in the Character of Wife*, and in *Appendix U* (2:214, 383-84).

corporeal desires, a quality both pragmatic and just given the distinct needs of democratic society. By his own measure, these needs have changed with the deepening of equality since colonial times. With its unique division of genders, the family has managed to meet these needs by raising woman's functional import to society beyond her respected, but explicitly subordinate place among the Puritans, and far above her accessory status in aristocratic times. By contrast, French women have retained aristocratic dispositions in an age that needs more from them than they have been prepared to give. Such dependent habits were less consequential to aristocracies, which took their moral and political bearings exclusively from men; this, of course, had ceased to be the case by Tocqueville's time.

Clearly, Tocqueville sees disparate needs emerging from the habits of democratic and aristocratic life, yet the normative end which these needs serve remains constant; though he does not explicitly say so, all evidence points to the improvement of humankind (i.e. intellectual, material and spiritual) as the "goal towards which the human race ought ever to be tending" (2:153). The strongly ordered American family emerges as a practical and just prescription to the general needs of democratic society, yet democracy's dangers manifest in discrete domains of social life that target these same aspects of ourselves that Tocqueville insists we maintain. Just how the American family addresses the *particular* afflictions of the mind, body and heart, and whether in doing so it maintains its virtue as a just and practical antidote, remains unanswered. The remainder of the paper is devoted to these questions.

CHAPTER III

THE AMERICAN FAMILY AND DEMOCRATIC HABITS OF THE MIND

The Family as Political Medium

Although the family has offered a window into politics throughout history, is it perhaps an antiquated perspective from which to view the new political science of democracy? After all, by Tocqueville's time the family had clearly lost the political function it held under aristocracy. Might a more proximate feature—say, laws or formal institutions—better explain the fate of democratic equality? In fact, Tocqueville speaks directly to this point, outlining the causes that maintain democracy in America. In order of primacy, he concludes, “[P]hysical circumstances are less efficient than the laws, and the laws infinitely less so than the customs of the people” (1:334).³⁸ The importance of customs is exemplified by the complicated nature of American federalism, embodied in the Constitution and maintained by a politically astute American public.³⁹ By contrast, notes Tocqueville, the Mexicans, despite having modeled our laws, lack the habits needed to sustain them and have consequently suffered the excesses of dual sovereignty under federalism (1:173). These examples serve to illustrate Tocqueville's claim that of the classes of causes through which to view democracy's dangers, customs is the most appropriate. Thus, insofar as the family is a product of Anglo-American customs, and no

³⁸ Tocqueville defines customs as “the whole moral and intellectual condition of a people” (1:310).

³⁹ On the complex nature of the Constitution, Tocqueville writes, “In examining the Constitution of the United States... one is startled at the variety of information and the amount of discernment that it presupposes in the people whom it is meant to govern” (1:172).

longer a political arm of aristocracy, I am confident that it is well-chosen as a window into democracy.

Given the suitability of family for this task, the chapters that follow try to identify the family's influence on equality as it manifests itself in the chief democratic habits of mind, body, and heart; specifically, it attempts to show how the natural family interacts with the most acute democratic dangers emerging from these categories. In an effort to fill the silence left by Tocqueville on the natural family's overall effect on society, I have attempted to 'connect the dots,' so to speak, between these topics in *Democracy*. Before beginning this process, however, a few words on methodology are appropriate.

Because the categories to which these dangers have been assigned are mine, not Tocqueville's, there is inevitable overlap as they appear throughout *Democracy*. Thus, at the risk of reducing Tocqueville's work to artificial dimensions I aim to deconstruct the dangers of equality and the merits of family, a matter of examining the parts to understand the whole. Furthermore, the dangers addressed here are extracted from the whole of *Democracy* but are not comprehensive; I have tried to identify the most prominent and as I can tell, acute dangers, as Tocqueville saw them arising from American democracy. If I have failed to assign dangers to their most appropriate categories, I believe that the essential character of the danger has nevertheless been preserved.

Additionally, care has been taken to distinguish between the dangers that Tocqueville saw and the democratic habits that give rise to them—a challenge at times, but, as I felt, necessary, as the simple presence of these habits does not foreshadow democracy's demise, but rather presents an unknown future in which society faces

dangers, but also opportunities. Thus, each category's chief habits lie in a similar relation to its consequences which range between an ideal outcome and a perversion, the latter, of course, representing its greatest danger.⁴⁰

Finally, readers may notice a certain degree of ex-post reasoning in the present analysis; that is, using equality's stated effects on family to frame an analysis of the family's reciprocal effect on the dangers of equality, seems circular. Interestingly, evidence shows that Tocqueville recognized such reciprocal causality as part of democratic life, particularly the republican embodiment of popular sovereignty, which he calls "the slow and quiet action of society upon itself" (1: 433). This issue is, in my view, an inevitable presence in Tocqueville's work, which has a difficult time accommodating the stricter methodological expectations of empirical social science; I believe the author would agree.

Dogma, Doubt and Majority Opinion

It should come as no surprise that the greatest dangers of Americans' intellectual habits stem from the equality of conditions under which they live, the same principle that guides Tocqueville's full analysis of American democracy. When considering the intellectual consequences of equality, two dispositions come to the fore. Tocqueville writes "I very clearly discern two tendencies; one leading the mind of every man to untried thoughts and the other prohibiting him from thinking at all" (2:10). In tandem, dogma and doubt precipitate a powerful majority opinion, which in its proper form supports republicanism, the backbone of American democracy, yet when corrupted becomes Tocqueville's now famous "tyranny of the majority." This phenomenon

⁴⁰ See the Appendix for the democratic habits and their consequences.

embodies the chief intellectual danger to liberty for its diminution of individual self conception, characterized by insecurity and self-doubt, and enfeebled notions of individual rights.

Tocqueville observes that Americans' philosophical habits are best characterized by the subjection of truth to individual reason while remaining skeptical towards accepted forms of knowledge (e.g. tradition) as well as the opinions of one's contemporaries (2:4-7). He notes that this disposition was derived from moves towards Humanism in the 16th and 17th centuries by men like Luther, Bacon and Descartes, but did not take root in democratic society until equality of conditions reached a certain critical mass in the 18th century when these ideas, which coalesced around self-determination, appealed to a public majority (2:6).

The subjectivity of Americans' philosophical bent, suggests excessive degrees of personal judgment following their habits of intellectual freedom; moral relativism, for example, comes to mind. But on this point, Tocqueville's fears were mixed, for alongside democratic skepticism he perceived a uniformly religious character to American society that circumscribed the purview of doubt to politics, but not morality, which was governed instead by dogma. He writes, "I believe that the men who live under the new forms of society [equality-based democracy] will make frequent use of their private judgment, but I am far from thinking that they will often abuse it" (2:8). In his view, religious dogma worked to contain the subjectivity to which democratic minds were prone. Nevertheless, Tocqueville understood that both skepticism and dogma remained potential threats to democracy, most prominently when the two combined.

Despite the strength of democratic skepticism, Tocqueville observed that democratic doubters can fully escape dogma neither as a society, whose ideas must coalesce around certain “common beliefs,” nor as individuals, who must take on faith certain premises if they wish to reason beyond fundamentals (2:10). To Tocqueville, dogmatic belief remains a fixture of the intellectual life of any people, regardless of age or regime. He writes “Thus the question is, not to know whether any intellectual authority exists in an age of democracy, but simply where it resides...” (2:10). Since skepticism debunks the supernatural, and private judgment trumps competing opinions, intellectual authority among democracies resides not in a particular man or class, nor “above humanity” but in the public majority, where the individual typically finds himself but also a power superior to him, taken individually (2:10-11).⁴¹

Augmenting the conceptual *locus* of authority in democratic majorities is a democratic aversion to secondary powers; that is, equality not only gives final authority to majority opinion, but places no other man or class between it and individual belief within the minds of men, concentrating majority power beyond even that of kings (2:307). In democracies, the popular majority rises as the superior and sole powerbroker. Consequently, man’s faith in his own rights and his willingness to dissent is easily overwhelmed by the preponderance of the majority (2:307). For this reason, Tocqueville feared Americans’ subservience to public dogma could “confine the action of private judgment within narrower limits than are suited to either the greatness or the happiness of the human race” (2:12). This truncated independence of mind concerned Tocqueville as

⁴¹ To this point Tocqueville writes, “At periods of equality men have no faith in one another, by reason of their common resemblance; but this very resemblance gives them an almost unbounded confidence in the judgment of the public; for it would seem probable that, as they are all endowed with equal means of judging, the greater truth should go with the greater number” (2:11).

a consequence of democratic dogma generally, but especially if the majority ever combined it with skepticism. On an individual basis, moral relativity, while pernicious, could be contained by the power of a public that held fixed notions of religious morality; but if public opinion itself ever mixed the two, and held doubt as its dogma, not only would religious norms become unsettled among the majority, but the few defenders that religion retained would be silenced by the powerful democratic majority. Thus, through their combined habits of dogma and doubt, Americans unwittingly raise the chief intellectual danger of the democratic age—tyrannical majority opinion.⁴²

To be clear, majority opinion, strictly speaking, is not tyrannical; on the contrary, Tocqueville saw it as a kind of ideological compass directing American republicanism, democracy's governing principle which he called "the tranquil rule of the majority" and from which the state derives its legitimate power (1:434). When unrestrained, however, republicanism can easily devolve into majority tyranny whose constrictive effect on democratic habits of mind were already visible in America and captured by a curious observation: the country has no great writers (1:275). It has none, claims Tocqueville, because the homage which writers must pay to their audience limits democratic novelists' ability to challenge established thought, for such criticism, unlike in previous ages, can be aimed at none but the majority who maintains the status quo (1:275).⁴³

⁴² Interestingly, the kind of exacting public opinion of which Tocqueville speaks seems to have appeared in Puritan times when it subjected all to the same oppressive laws. On the severity of the laws and customs to which the Puritans subjected themselves, Tocqueville writes "These errors are no doubt discreditable to human nature, which is incapable of laying firm hold on what is true and just and is often reduced to the alternative of two excesses" (1:41). However, while the Puritans were sensationally dogmatic in their moral code, it was religious *conviction*, not relativity to which they held fast, a much preferable, even "the most desirable" kind of dogma (1:41). Thus, while Tocqueville may lament the severity with which Puritan laws subjugated individual opinion, he found its morality to have salutary effect on society.

It may seem odd that such a statement about writers could be true of a country where independence of thought appears so prominent, but when the stakes of dissent are considered in light of the power of public opinion, Tocqueville's claim gains traction. Consider the following on oppression: "The authority of a king," he writes "controls the actions of men without subduing their will. But the majority possesses a power that is physical and moral at the same time, which acts upon the will as much as upon the actions and represses not only all contest, but all controversy" (1:273). By stripping nothing from dissenters but their good name, a tyrannical majority makes pariahs out of men; it robs them of their cherished social equality, and in doing so, effectively targets democrats' greatest weakness—their will, or, the fortitude of their soul.⁴⁴

Interestingly, the target of majority tyranny—the will—is the same dimension of life cultivated in democratic women through education and showcased later by their domestic courage; in a general way then, women bring to families a quality that counters the effects of tyranny, most directly on themselves, but also on their children in whom they surely inculcate similar strengths.⁴⁵ In boys, however, a counter-insurgency against their mother's education begins at adolescence, when they start to become their fathers'

⁴³ As an aside, Tocqueville's observation puts the works of one of America's greatest writers, Mark Twain, in a clearer light, for Twain's genius is his ability, through fiction, to challenge his readers' conventions without them realizing it. Given Tocqueville's point on great writers, it is worth considering whether Twain's works could have garnered the same popularity if they were *explicitly* political.

⁴⁴ By contrast, Tocqueville implies that such ostracism had little effect on aristocrats, whose intimate familiarity with the soul strengthened their resolve to pursue unpopular beliefs (and practices), since they often felt sanctioned by a higher power (1:274).

⁴⁵ Men, too, evidence determination in their efforts, but the end of these efforts is not the sacrifice of material pleasures to the interests of the soul, but rather glory in the eyes of their contemporaries, which largely revolves around mastering the physical world, not one's self. *Democracy's* chapter on male honor makes this clear (2:249-50).

social equals and the intellectual consequences of equality (e.g. dogma and doubt) begin to take hold. Still, while female courage does not *prevent* tyranny from exploiting the weakness of democratic wills, it mitigates the effects of such an attack by modeling resolve and overall moral strength in the family.

Under equality, the majority also compromises the occasional revolutionary state of mind needed to sustain American republicanism. Although republicanism remained foremost a deliberate, reflexive process of political adjustment, Tocqueville recognized the need for great change as it developed. He writes, “republican notions insinuate themselves into all the ideas, opinions and habits of the Americans and are formally recognized by the laws; and before the laws could be altered, the whole community must be revolutionized” (1:436). This process occurred on a larger scale (the whole Western world) with the Protestant Reformation, the Scientific Revolution and Enlightenment thought, as the ideas of Luther, Bacon and Descartes took centuries to normalize but ultimately proved the revolutionary nature of self-determination, the principle underlying popular sovereignty and republicanism.⁴⁶

Unfortunately, the openness to revolutionary thought needed by republicanism is progressively compromised by equality; skepticism, specifically, distances men from the views of others—revolutionary or not—while their fears of majority censure silence progressive voices. Thus, as equality deepens, the majority gains strength and begins to restrict both the presentation and the reception of new ideas. It enervates the will of man

⁴⁶ Tocqueville understands self-determination, the idea behind the movements mentioned here, as the notion that “providence has given to every human being the degree of reason necessary to direct himself in the affairs that interest him exclusively”(1:435-36).

by turning his powerful habit of doubt upon himself. “The majority do not need to force him; they convince him,” writes Tocqueville (2:274-75). The consequence is a general kind of apathy that precipitates the death of republicanism, a process that must eschew intellectual stasis, and reserve a place even for great change, to maintain “the slow and quiet action of society upon itself” (1: 433).

Paralleling the mediocrity of ideas under entrenched equality is the mediocrity of ambition; just as skepticism distributes intellectual authority among men (save for the ultimate authority that dogma vests in the majority), equality disburses opportunities for wealth, making few men rich, but few poor (2:258). Discouraged by the energy and time required for great success, democrats train their sights on closer goals which are pursued piecemeal, reinforcing conservative, prudent habits of mind (2:258). “A man cannot gradually expand his mind as he does his house,” writes Tocqueville (2:258). Such modest goals, however, exacerbate the great weakness of the democratic soul by turning ambition towards the easier, material satisfactions of the body and away from loftier challenges of honor and glory, desired by the spirit. Consequently, Tocqueville fears “for democratic society much less from the boldness than from the mediocrity of desires” (2:261).

Tocqueville makes clear that habits of mind under a tyrannical majority support neither the revolutionary mindset nor the ambition needed to eschew apathy. And yet, the sharp separation of people under hierarchy also settles the mind into habits of thought too fixed to serve this end (2:274). Between these extremes, however, is a condition that does support revolutionary thought, and which may spur ambition as well. In this state

ideas are less settled than in aristocratic times but “[conditions] are sufficiently unequal for men to exercise a vast power on the minds of one another” (2:274).

On the domestic front, the family creates this intermediary state by dividing jurisdiction of the principal habits of thought between the sexes—the woman over religion and dogma, the man over politics and doubt—reducing competition between them and fostering the moral influence of wives over their husbands.⁴⁷ The religious norms she embodies reflect the most dogmatic themes of intellectual life and become a crucial limit to male skepticism, yet one that also helps justify its use; by demarcating the limits of dogma from those of doubt, female morality adds confidence to the use of male skepticism within its proper field. Without such dogma, Tocqueville argues, “doubt gets hold of the higher powers of the intellect and half paralyzes all the others” so that even opinions on secular matters become “ill-defended and easily abandoned” (2:22). Moreover, by modeling morality instead of simply preaching it, women add efficacy to the moral discipline of democratic (i.e. empirical) husbands, perhaps more so than the sermons of America’s clergymen. Thus, her role within the family helps *confirm* rather than revolutionize ideas, but when it comes to progressive thought, the relevant question concerns habit more than content: By allowing themselves to be moved by the morality of their wives at home, do men develop habits of intellectual flexibility in public life that contradict their skeptical dispositions? Even a small move in this direction would account for a less hostile atmosphere for new, even revolutionary ideas in public life.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ That men have a political/public influence on their wives is taken for granted. Of the Americans Tocqueville writes, “They hold that every association must have a head in order to accomplish its object, and that the natural head of the conjugal association is man. They do not therefore deny him the right of directing his partner....” (2:223).

In a final way, family checks tyranny by promoting what distinguishes republicanism from it, specifically, *limited* majority power. Such limits, Tocqueville claims, are found in “humanity, justice and reason” in the moral world, and “vested rights” in the political (1:434). This is to say that a popular majority, however strong, can never mandate the terms of these principles. The family helps recognize these barriers in much the same way that it respects God and nature, by separating stewardship of morality and politics.

For their part, women symbolize the moral features above in a few ways, clearest of which, perhaps, is their embodiment of humanity; while the democratic woman is certainly not the first to bear and raise children, she inhabits the novel position of moral authority whereby her experience as a mother cultivating life is translated into social norms that respect humanity. Captured best by Christian morality, they are promulgated by her at home. Her recognition of reason, however, comes less from a uniquely female experience with this principle (e.g. motherhood in the case of humanity) than from what she makes of reason, once acquired. Tocqueville points out that public opinion does not deny her an education on par with men’s, as her intellectual faculties are expected to hold equal promise (2:225). The two sexes use their education, however, to serve different ends: Men employ reason for personal judgment and in service to the skepticism that underlies popular sovereignty; women utilize it in the form of foresight and to recognize

⁴⁸ To take this point further, perhaps husbands’ receptivity to the influence of their wives—moral or otherwise—is attributable not to the persuasion of sex, as Allan Bloom argues, but to their perception that their improvement comes not only from someone who is not their social equal (and thus not their competitor), but from an extension of themselves. This may be so in the conventional sense—that through marriage the man makes the woman “his”—and in a deeper, religious sense as well. *Ephesians 5* speaks of the unity of husband and wife as one flesh and that by loving their wives, men really love themselves.

the merits of self-restraint. Thus, female reason is not a novel principle that women bring to the moral world, but rather a new application thereof.

Women's promotion of justice has to do with the favorable consequences of her recognized role as "protector of morals," mentioned at the end of Chapter II; to recapitulate briefly, as the greatest needs of democratic peoples demand an attention to the soul, women meet this challenge through their embodiment of moral resolve and material restraint, habits that counter democrats' excessive passions of the body. As her moral function is sanctioned by public opinion, the values she promotes are normalized and received throughout the family, where they raise the attention of all its members to the needs of the soul. Insofar as this outcome is favorable to democracy it is also, in Tocqueville's view, just.

That women add these unique dimensions to the moral world is not to say that men do not support humanity, reason or justice, but simply that women bring a certain perspective to these features that men either lack (in the case of motherhood and justice) or reinterpret (in their use of reason). Moreover, the moral world, as we have seen with religious dogma, gives structure and limits to the world of politics, where men's role is more obvious. Here, Tocqueville speaks of *vested rights*, which American men promote through their participation in public affairs. However, vested rights differ from their moral counterparts in a key way; they reflect social conditions rather than exist prior to them, yet they still lie beyond the limits of legitimate majority rule. A complete understanding of this complex feature requires a clearer definition of the principle of right, which in Tocqueville's words is "simply that of virtue introduced into the political world" (1:254).

Recall briefly that Tocqueville believes that the needs of societies differ with the age and its circumstances (2:153). Thus political virtue—the principle of right—is different across time; in democracies, it is tailored to what befits equality of conditions. Although Tocqueville did *not* feel that “the exercise of political rights should immediately be granted to all men,”⁴⁹ democratic equality has rent the blanket of faith that had covered the aristocratic world such that no manner of governing is left but compulsion or persuasion (1:252, 255); if men are not to be ruled by force, they must now learn to rule themselves, and within the bounds of morality, a task predicated on the right of self-determination, which the Americans claim for, and vest in, themselves.

Through this process, democracy ties the personal interests of individuals to the political well-being of the community, which each man helps direct (1:255). Moreover, respect for rights is cultivated by the extent to which they can be claimed, the reason why American men support vested rights by living them; Tocqueville notes that in Jacksonian America even the lower classes display a keen appreciation for their rights thanks to their steady good use (2:254). As men gain a familiarity with their rights, they also recognize their limits, understood as follows: “[E]veryone is the best and sole judge of his own private interest and...society has no right to control a man’s actions unless they are prejudicial to the common weal or unless the common weal demands his help” (1:67).

This tenet presents a difficult proposition, as the common good is defined by the republican majority, yet vested rights exist beyond the limits of its power. Could, then, a

⁴⁹ This denial of right presumably rests on its endangerment of some, and therefore its lack of political virtue. Tocqueville writes “It cannot be doubted that the moment at which political rights are granted to a people that had before been without them is a very critical one, that the measure, though often necessary is always dangerous. A child may kill before he is aware of the value of life; and he may deprive a person of his property before he is aware that his own may be taken from him. The lower orders, when they are first invested with political rights, stand in relation to those rights in the same position as the child does to the whole of nature” (1:256).

republican majority divest self-determination from individuals or groups in the interest of the common good? Based on Tocqueville's notion of, and the moral limits to the political principle of right, the answer appears to be 'yes,' but only in those matters that are exclusively of public interest, of which, say, prosecuting criminals provides a rare example; although incarcerating these offenders infringes upon their right to self-determination, criminality poses such a public threat that this vested right has lost its political virtue; thus, criminals divest *themselves* of political right, such that little exists to trespass upon when rights are revoked in the name of public good. Still, on Tocqueville's view, rights taken must exclude those which are solely private in nature (e.g. religion), at which point the moral world steps in, instructing just and reasonable limits.⁵⁰

By enriching these features of morality and politics, the administration of the two worlds by the sexes helps the public recognize the limits of its power. "The republicans in the United States," writes Tocqueville "set a high value on morality, respect religious belief, and acknowledge the existence of rights" (1:434). Decentralizing the administration of this authority also challenges notions of centralized majority rule that are natural to democratic minds. Thus, to whatever extent the natural family cannot prevent ideas of unlimited power, it mitigates its effects by dividing the execution of that authority between the sexes. Interestingly, this move in the domestic sphere mirrors the means taken to limit power politically; rather than diminish rights to protect against excessive freedoms, Americans have simply distributed their execution across a range of

⁵⁰ A more vexing example is the absence of the political rights for women; clearly they have done nothing to merit the loss of such rights. How then can Tocqueville justify the strict domesticity they are assigned by public opinion? One possibility is that female domesticity constitutes the *best* contribution to political virtue by the morality that it promotes, which makes domesticity right on Tocqueville's view. Additionally, Tocqueville suggests that women are not deprived of political rights because they do not experience their social position as such (2:223). Nevertheless female domesticity remains a difficult social construct to square with the positive right to self-determination.

administrators, each of whom has only enough power to succeed in his public charge, so that, in Tocqueville's words, "the community should be at once regulated and free" (1:73).⁵¹

The opposite appears true in Europe where a disregard for gender differences (e.g. France) is accompanied by the boundless rule of the majority. In Europe, writes Tocqueville, "legitimate tyranny and holy injustice" are countenanced in the "name of the people" (1:434). Although it is difficult to trace causality from gender uniformity to tyranny, the consequences above stem from misapplied habits of mind—dogma to politics, doubt to morality, respectively—each of which strongly compromises liberty.⁵² Moreover, these phenomena highlight the importance of customs, mentioned earlier, to the maintenance of democracy. Not unlike Mexico's experience with federalism, Europe's despotic rendition of republicanism seems due to an absence of the cultural preconditions needed for success—in this case a public opinion that sharply divides, yet equally values the two sexes. "While the European endeavors to forget his domestic troubles by agitating society," writes Tocqueville, "the American derives from his own home that love of order which he afterwards carries with him into public affairs" (1:315). Thus, by dividing the administration of moral and political authority between the sexes, the American family facilitates the appropriate use of dogma and doubt; this, in turn,

⁵¹ A brief, though good example of administrative decentralization can be found in 'Powers of the Township in New England' in *Democracy*, Volume One, Chapter Five (1:64-66).

⁵² On the latter consequence, Tocqueville writes, "When the religion of a people is destroyed, doubt gets a hold of the higher powers of the intellect and half paralyzes all the others. ...Such a condition cannot but enervate the soul, relax the springs of the will and prepare a people for servitude" (2:23). On the former, the effect is similar: "Some have not feared to assert that a people can never outstep the boundaries of justice and reason in those affairs that are peculiarly its own; and that consequently full power may be given to the majority by which it is represented. But this is the language of a slave" (1:269).

supports a public majority that understands its limits to power and avoids the slide from republicanism into tyranny.

CHAPTER IV

THE AMERICAN FAMILY AND DEMOCRATIC HABITS OF THE BODY

Before discussing the so-called habits of the body, a brief point on conceptual definitions may be helpful; the habits addressed here, refer to those behaviors, in tandem with the notions of physical welfare behind them, which serve the material desires of democrats under conditions of equality. Viewed as such, these habits overlap, at times, with dispositions of mind, considered broadly. To untangle democracy's dangers however, it is simply helpful to view them through distinct, albeit imperfect categories. Nevertheless, it may assist readers to understand 'habits of the body' mentioned here as those which *concern* the body, be they actions taken on its behalf, or notions of how to meet its needs.

The family's interaction with these habits comes indirectly, promoting practices that counteract the dangerous desires of the body without explicitly condemning the taste for physical welfare. It does so almost exclusively as a venue for religion which, I will show, is the most compelling, but also problematic medium for this task. Given the discussion of justice in Chapter II on the needs of different ages, it is not surprising that attention to the body is a chief feature of democratic society, yet one that may ultimately precipitate its demise. Tocqueville discusses this predilection under a few names: "The taste for physical well-being," "the love of physical gratifications" or "physical prosperity" and "the passion for physical comforts" all refer to a disposition natural

among democrats for an attention to the needs of the flesh.⁵³ Attention to physical welfare, however, is not exclusively democratic; aristocrats appeared, at times, famously hedonistic. What distinguishes this habit between the ages is its relative ubiquity, the markedly different form it takes, and most importantly, its consequences.

In aristocracies, Tocqueville observes that a general absence of material well-being among commoners is punctuated by extravagant prosperity among nobility, neither of whom seem overly concerned with this aspect of their welfare (2:136-37); the latter simply take for granted the material comforts of their inherited station, while the former, for reasons similarly owed to class, give up hope of ever living well (2:136-37). The outcomes of such fixed customs were aristocratic societies that placed little value on material well-being—a very different, but equally problematic consequence (e.g. squalor) for much of mankind, than the passion for well-being, under conditions of equality.

In America, where family tradition and heritage have been compromised more so than in Europe, and where the fortunes of men are in constant flux, equality opens the road to prosperity to all. The equal opportunity to procure wealth and the vicissitudes that men face to maintain it keeps “the love of well-being [as] the predominant taste of the nation” (2:138). Interestingly, as the importance of well-being is raised, the enterprises needed to fulfill it diminish. Aristocrats, for example, used lavish excess to gratify material desires of largely secondary importance, while democrats doggedly pursue life’s simplest pleasures as if little exists beyond them (2:140). It is this distinction, both of the relative priority of well-being, and the means used to serve them, that gives the habits of the body in democracies an especially dangerous cast.

⁵³ When helpful I have tried to distinguish the effects of the love of well-being on democracy generally, from its effect on Americans specifically, as there are, at times, important and marked differences.

Before discussing these features however, it is important to recognize that attention to physical well-being, like the mental habits of dogma and doubt, and the majority opinion they support, is not in itself pernicious; Tocqueville finds merit (and justice) in attending to one's material needs in pursuit of human improvement. Rather, it is the manner in which this habit is pursued, the ends which it serves, and, like majority opinion, the limits that instruct it that determine its consequences, including its relative danger. In one sense, the Americans' love of well-being is very positive. Unlike in aristocracies, men who have not yet achieved material success retain perennial hope for prosperity, while those who have finally found it never take its permanence for granted. Under these conditions, opportunities for prosperity foster a common appreciation for physical well-being among men. If Americans sometimes allow this need too much sway, they at least never forget its importance.

As we turn to the more dangerous side of the love of well-being in democratic times, it becomes clear that Tocqueville sees harmful consequences emerging from this habit, some from the relentless consumption that satisfies it, others from the passion for material welfare itself. In terms of the former, these means to well-being manifest in paltry material goals rather than enterprises of extravagance. In America, for example, men seek to "add a few yards of land...plant an orchard...enlarge a dwelling" to gratify their wants (2:140). Given the diminished conception of man under a preponderant majority, it is little wonder that his ambition favors such modest means over grander, more daring enterprises. In pursuing such tangible gains, Tocqueville observes, Americans do not indulge in proscribed addictions but instead follow sanctioned paths to well-being (2:141).

The consequences of such habits are very different from the outcome of aristocratic opulence. Of the latter, debasement was the danger of the day, while in democratic times a distraction or slackening of the soul presides (2:141). The character of this danger is not unlike what democrats face from the loss of their revolutionary mindset through misapplied habits of mind. Recall that Tocqueville mentions revolutions (of thought as well as politics) not for the chaos with which they threaten democratic order, but for the apathy that their long-term absence precipitates. Similarly, the comfort and effortless convenience towards which their pursuit of property aims, distracts democrats from loftier objectives which, when undertaken, facilitate human improvement (2:140).⁵⁴ On these mundane means to well-being, Tocqueville writes “These are small objects, but the soul clings to them; it dwells upon them closely...till they at last shut out the rest of the world and sometimes intervene between itself and heaven” (2:140). Oddly, what augments the danger of Americans’ legitimate means to well-being are morality, order and religion, the very characteristics that protect them against tyranny (2:140). It follows that, without intending to, the natural family abets this danger by the support it gives these virtues.

This assistance is owed, in particular, to the new role of women under conditions of equality. We have seen, for example, how the separation of the sexes in the natural family creates a tidy division of authority between morals and politics that gives order to these worlds. Moreover, the regularity that married women bring to the American home (esp. female sexual morality) creates a domestic base for public tranquility, the first

⁵⁴ The improving quality of hardship, as well as its absence from democratic society, is taken up more vociferously by Friedrich Nietzsche in *Beyond Good and Evil*, a half-century later. See, sections 202, 212, 225 for examples.

precondition of commercial success. Finally, as “women are the protectors of morals,” they are also the advocates of Christianity in America, which, on Tocqueville's view, teaches that the honest acquisition of wealth is not incompatible with salvation (2:27). Thus, an unintended consequence of the family's supporting role in democracy is that it indirectly facilitates well-being through the honest pursuit of property, a tendency that Tocqueville fears may someday foster an ethos of “virtuous materialism” (2:141). In such a state, these paltry means of material gratification become, themselves, ends toward which all human action is directed (2:141). At this point, the democratic love of well-being takes a dangerous turn.

It is worth noting that Tocqueville did *not* think that Americans had reached this stage (2:147); while he did observe their distraction from higher aims of the soul, thanks to their petty means to well-being, no evidence suggests they had begun to conflate the means with ends; Americans were not, on his view, materialists. We can credit this virtue, perhaps, to their robust religious life and strong opinions on family. Before doing so, however, it is important to examine the danger of true materialism, at which point the means to well-being *do* become life's exclusive ends, fostered by the belief that the soul of man is nothing. This specter represents the worst possible outcome for democratic habits of the body and exerts a double danger on society, threatening recognition of the soul altogether and endangering liberty as well.

Although materialism is largely eschewed by Americans, the danger that it poses to humanity is so formative and far-reaching that it warrants some of Tocqueville's strongest censure in *Democracy*.⁵⁵ In nations with strongly religious customs—which are

predicated, ultimately, on the fate of the human soul—the pursuit of well-being is restricted to actions which do not contradict the tenets of Christianity; criminal means to prosperity, for example, are proscribed. Moreover, as long as the soul, however attenuated, remains fixed in the minds of men, actions taken on the body's behalf will never become the ends to life; they may consume men, but the presence of the soul will keep their thoughts and feelings buoyed upward (2:155). Materialism, however, offers no such hope. If the objects of well-being in democracy distract the soul from lofty enterprises, materialism denies the soul its existence altogether. Under such conditions, the rationale of Christian morality falters, and the habits of the body, already acute under conditions of equality, become instructed instead by materialism, which “disposes men to believe that all is matter only” giving them free reign to pursue material welfare without limitations (2:154).

That true materialism is not evident in America, however, may be qualified by the presence (albeit infrequent) of religious fanaticism there. On Tocqueville's view, “the taste for what is infinite and the love of what is immortal” is a divine fixture of man's constitution, and cannot be abrogated by custom (2:142). The chronic subordination of spiritual needs to the wants of the body fosters a kind of “religious insanity” that crops up in Americans who deny themselves spiritual fulfillment (2:142).⁵⁶ Its presence suggests that while the American nation is not materialist, an ardent love for material well-being prevails in some alongside the priority that most allow the dictates of religion. Thus, by

⁵⁵ He writes, for example, “If among the opinions of democratic people any of those pernicious theories exist which tend to inculcate that all perishes with the body, let men by whom such theories are professed be marked as the natural foes of the whole people” (2:154).

⁵⁶ It is noteworthy that Tocqueville observes this phenomenon in the West especially, states which represent, literally, the leading edge of Americans' acquisitive habits.

Tocqueville's time, materialism may have already taken root in America, and, while remaining largely subterranean, the infrequent, but extreme religious passions that he witnessed may be a premonitory sign of its growing ascendancy.

Just how far down the road to materialism the Americans have traveled is important to know, not only to assay their spiritual health, but also to forecast the survival of liberty there. Tocqueville believes that if democratic peoples, in their rush toward wealth, overlook the free associations that underlie democratic prosperity, their love of well-being will seek to dominate—rather than take instruction from—their “education and experience of free institutions” (2:149). Should this occur, he argues, men see (albeit wrongly) the civic participation required for freedom as irksome and superfluous to their new priority, the pursuit of property (2:149). Not only does this condition disengage men politically, it endears them to the first ruler who can ensure tranquility and order (the preconditions for prosperity) to whom they exchange their civil liberties for a clearer path to wealth (2:149);⁵⁷ in democracies, this outcome disposes men to despotism.⁵⁸

Irrespective of the true degree of American materialism, the character of well-being in democratic times suggests that its dangers can be mitigated by giving men loftier immaterial means to follow their ambition and, more importantly, by keeping the ends of

⁵⁷ Interestingly, Tocqueville fears materialism for the very reason that Thomas Hobbes praises it in *Leviathan*: it disengages men from politics. In Hobbes's view, the path to public tranquility is paved by prosperity which he believes is a liberty unavailable in the more brutish state of nature. Tocqueville, on the other hand, finds self-determination (though different from that in Hobbes's primeval state) as the mark of civilization, while Hobbes suggests that it is an onerous and ideally an unnecessary distraction from private life. Thus, both men agree on the effects of materialism (and of religion, for that matter), even if they give it a converse place within their political theories.

⁵⁸ It is important to note that Tocqueville did *not* think that democratic despotism was the inevitable outcome of conditions of equality despite democrats' tendency to accept circumstantial fatalism, generally (2:93). To counter our deterministic beliefs, Tocqueville enjoins us to recognize that a portion of history is at all times the product of human action; therefore our fate is largely within our control. Thus, to avoid the despotism to which *Democracy* seeks to alert us, our first task is to believe in our own ability to do so.

well-being from becoming the ends of life itself, a process that requires, centrally, the confirmation of the “immortality of the soul” (2:154). To accomplish these goals, Tocqueville suggests we “diffuse the love of the infinite, lofty aspirations and a love of pleasures not of this world” (2:154). Religion, the most obvious medium for such a task, overflows with such qualities but cannot inculcate them by challenging well-being head on, for the passion is too natural to equality to ever be fully contained. Rather, it utilizes the family, which functions both as its surrogate and in its own capacity to check democracy’s materialistic malaise.

As the family is the chief focus here, a thorough account of how religion mitigates materialism, save for when it interfaces with family to achieve this result, is beyond the scope of this work.⁵⁹ The first such joint-effort regards the challenge that religion faces simply entering secular society. Tocqueville notes that as equality intensifies, religion must be sure not to cross the mandates of public opinion (2:28). In this respect, the traditional architecture of religious edification faces significant barriers; it can no longer rely on its connection to statesmen for authority, nor can it remain particularly hierarchical, for democrats eschew complicated forms and pride themselves on the division of church and state (2:5, 26).⁶⁰ Consequently, Tocqueville remarks “I have seen no country in which Christianity is clothed with fewer forms, figures or observances than in the United States, or where it presents distinct, simple and general notions to the mind”

⁵⁹ I would argue, however, that religion, as portrayed in *Democracy*, is the leading antidote to the dangers of the age of equality; all others, including family, are secondary. But this is beside the focus of the paper.

⁶⁰ Presumably, the overt hierarchy of Catholicism would be a greater barrier to its influence on the secular life of society than the egalitarianism of Protestantism; however, in terms of strictly religious appeal, Tocqueville observes that Catholicism is making great strides in America for its authoritative unity (2:30).

(2:28). Upon close inspection, however, it appears that Christianity in America hides its forms and figures in an unsuspecting place: the democratic family.

Tocqueville avers that to make any inroads in democratic times, religion must disengage from politics, as not doing so would endanger its influence over the minds of men by redirecting its attention from universal to factional interests, the source of its demise across Europe (1:325). In America, while religion remains formally separate from politics, it is hardly divorced from public life;⁶¹ it simply makes a quieter, less obtrusive entrance into public opinion through family, over whose women, if we recall, it holds particular sway. Through her socially separate, but equally valued role within the home (as shown in Chapter II) the American wife constitutes an inconspicuous and thus more acceptable form for the promulgation of religious ideas, including: the soul's permanence, a love of infinity, and immaterial pleasures, all of which instruct a measured approach to material well-being. In fact, the domestic female becomes an ideal courier of Christian morality in democratic times, for her difference is disarming enough that men grant her a kind of moral and intellectual influence that they would never allow their male contemporaries. Standing apart from the formal administration of the church (i.e. clergy), while still providing cover for religion, women and family accomplish its mandates nonetheless.

As the American family teaches morality beyond the sermons of church, it begins to counteract materialism more directly. Like religion however, it does not impugn attention to physical welfare; instead it heightens attention to the soul and in doing so, supports the better use of each. Tocqueville implies that successful democracy is

⁶¹ Tocqueville goes so far as to call religion "the first of [America's] political institutions," for the use of freedom it facilitates there" (2:316).

predicated on the “doctrine of the immortality of the soul,” yet he avers that politics can not enlist religion for this task (2:156). Under such conditions, its leaders, Tocqueville feels, must meet this challenge by “always...act[ing] as if they believed in it themselves” (2:156). If we recall the character of American wives from Chapter II, we see that fidelity and female courage at home models the kind of temperance and moral fortitude that Tocqueville asks of legislators in public. Moreover, these characteristics succeed without denying men (or women) the “legitimate pleasures of the home” (e.g. sex) without which men develop “a taste for excess” among other disorders (1:315).

Tocqueville expects that by facilitating the use of higher faculties, the soul finds its rightful place as captain of all human passions, *including* that for physical welfare; thus, the needs of the soul and those of the body are not mutually exclusive, but rather complementary. By giving material desires a more enlightened character, the soul actually improves the quality of material welfare far beyond the indiscriminate acquisition that occurs when its needs, under materialism, go unrecognized. “In man,” writes Tocqueville “the angel teaches the brute the art of satisfying its desires” (2:157). Here, his example of female courage is particularly apropos. In sacrificing the physical comforts of village life for the austerity of wilderness living, the American wife draws on her strength of will not in service of religious idealism, but for the promise of her family’s future welfare, secured in due course by the prosperity of her pioneer husband whom she supports with the natural enjoyments of home. By disciplining her desire for physical comfort, she controls her enjoyment of material welfare with prudence and an

eye to the future, rather than remaining controlled by her desire for immediate gratification.⁶²

Finally, the family helps check democrats' material instincts by inculcating a taste for immaterial pleasures. Here it operates less as a surrogate for religion, though it works similarly by moving the ends to living beyond the most proximate and tangible of material goals. Recall that Tocqueville praises the Massachusetts founding for its families, specifically for the presence of women and children there.⁶³ Of the two, women seem to be of particular value for any number of contributions they make to the growth of American democracy: their connection to religion, their novel place within public opinion, the courage and fortitude they model at home, etc. On the other hand, children appear complementary to democracy more by their presence than by any direct contribution they make to liberty. In terms of mitigating materialism, this is particularly true.

Tocqueville writes that in ages of equality it is important that both political leaders and philosophers show that life's best rewards come only after long and continuous efforts towards distant goals, a belief that religion teaches through the doctrine of salvation (2:159). At home, parenthood embodies this idea. To parents, children become (hopefully!) the apotheoses of immaterial rewards whose attainment is predicated, to varying degrees, on parenting over a lifetime. This is especially true in ages of equality where the fate of each is less secure than ever before. Under aristocracy, the invariability of class and lineage rendered quality parenting, presumably, less

⁶² Alice Behnegar's discussion of women's acceptance of marital inequality (p.9) is made in similar terms.

⁶³ See page 20.

relevant, for family name and fortune propped up prodigal sons while even the most well-raised children were circumscribed by station. By contrast, democratic flux makes the stakes of parenting greater, but the process more rewarding. After all, one of equality's virtues is that it strengthens the natural affections between generations and facilitates the free and regular exchange of ideas (2:206). Thus, if anything inspires lifelong attention to distant, immaterial goals, it is the hope of seeing one's children succeed, a prospect made palpable by parenthood in the American family.

CHAPTER V

THE AMERICAN FAMILY AND DEMOCRATIC HABITS OF THE HEART

The final category into which democracy's chief dangers fall, and within which the family's influence can be seen, is that of the heart, the most intangible dimension of man, yet one whose character holds the strongest implications for politics. Here, I would like to clarify what I call democratic habits of the heart. To this moniker, I ascribe not only the "outward form of human actions"—what Tocqueville terms *manners*, but deeper dispositions of mind and feelings between people, moral and intellectual features of democracy present in American *customs* (1:310). For, while the chief habit of the heart concerns feelings, it is impossible to understand it fully without discussing certain ideas that shape it, or the concomitant actions that constitute the true character of its danger and virtue. Nevertheless, as any discussion of the human heart remains challenging for its conceptual imprecision, I ask for the reader's patience with my definition of its habits here.

As Tocqueville suggests that the heart is home to our most human faculties—namely our morality—it is the complex realm of human associational life over which the heart most strongly presides. In other words, within the "government of human societies" or, political life, the habits of the heart are most marked (2:301). Thus, the interaction of the American family with these habits, in particular, will be most proximate to its effect on democracy (the essence of my research question) although, as I have shown, family clearly influences democracy through habits of the mind and body too.

As we turn to equality's effect on the heart, Tocqueville notes that the first observation is a feeling of separateness, which, on reflection, should come as little surprise (2:304). As class—the tie that in previous ages bound men to each other by duty and necessity—attenuates, men increasingly embrace their newfound self-sufficiency; skepticism and the pursuit of material well-being, for example, are also manifestations of this agency. Tocqueville, however, makes a key distinction between civil and political autonomy in democratic times that alerts us to the normative limit of democrats' feelings of separateness. He writes, "In civil life, every man may, strictly speaking, fancy that he can provide for his own wants; in political life he can fancy no such thing" (2:123). Under equality, the average man is better equipped with the intellectual and economic resources—but not the political means—to provide for himself without the help of others. Thus, if feelings instruct associations, the bedrock of democratic politics, the heart's inclination to separate and pursue private interests has clear political implications for the age of equality.

While feelings of separation are exclusive to the heart, the mind is similarly affected, as we have seen, by notions of independence, which give democrats their skeptical dispositions under conditions of equality (2:104); moreover, like the chief habits of the mind (dogma and doubt) and the body (the love of material well-being), the heart's inclination toward private interests holds both positive and negative potential for democracy. From this habit, we can trace the closest relationship between the immediate consequences of private interest and their ultimate fate for society—liberty or despotism. The factor upon which this outcome turns is where the pursuit of private interest leads our associations with others.

The force of private interest in democratic ages should not be underestimated, nor should the weight of its implications. Tocqueville writes, “It must...be expected that personal interest will become more than ever the principle if not the sole spring of men’s actions; but it remains to be seen how each man will understand his personal interest” (2:132). Most importantly, this understanding is crucial for the survival of democracy which relies on a connection between private interest and public good fitted to the moral habits of the age. Whereas in past times self-sacrifice was promoted for no other end than the beauty of its virtue, Tocqueville observes that the same habits today must be couched in terms that resonate with man’s singular interest in himself, namely the utility that doing good affords (2:130). In America, he notes, the moralists have successfully normalized a principle of conduct, “enlightened self-interest” (or, “self-interest well-understood”), from this connection (2:130). In doing so, the moral consequences of the separation man feels are connected to collective welfare so that in working towards the latter one serves private interest too. Although enlightened self-interest does not diminish democrats’ enlarged love of self, this disposition is much preferred to a darker, and perhaps more likely manifestation of private interest in democratic times—individualism.

Like the prevalence of enlightened self-interest, individualism is also singular to democracy, but instead of recognizing the connection between personal and common interest—even if for no other reason than to maximize the former—individualism denies the utility of shared enterprise by replacing it, instead, with the idea that man is wholly self-sufficient (2:105). Under individualism, men “are apt to imagine that their whole destiny is in their own hands,” writes Tocqueville (2:105). This misconception appears

to stem from the perceived irrelevance of duties as democratic citizens become increasingly autonomous. By contrast, Tocqueville shows how class and tradition tied men to one another in all aspects of aristocratic life, when success, however great or small, was predicated on services offered, or claimed from, others (2:105). By virtue of the rights and responsibilities—as well as the concomitant dependence—of class and generational hierarchies, aristocracy's forms helped disabuse even the noblest aristocrats of feelings of self-sufficiency; from precisely converse conditions, democratic equality confirms the very same feelings.

Moreover, even American democracy cannot maintain the same commitment to duty with replacement forms such as the democratic family (i.e. the family built upon natural sympathies), as the rise of individualism is too strongly linked to the loss of tradition, and its medium, paternal authority, for the new moral matriarch to successfully replicate; important though she is, traditional notions of duty that accompanied paternal rule escape the moral authority of the American wife, for whom self-sacrifice is realized by each generation, only to be discovered anew through experience and education—but not tradition—in the next. This is not to say that duties are not recreated in the American family, for they are, but simply that duty there can no longer *rely* on tradition, and must call on something else—namely, enlightened self-interest—for its legitimacy.⁶⁴

⁶⁴ American women's notions of propriety and social roles, are based *first* on the use of reason and only secondarily, on tradition or faith (2:211). Given the heightened import of religion to democracy, we can understand this ordering thus: If religious traditions (e.g. faith-based notions of female virtue) are used inappropriately, they risk endangerment, for the age of equality engenders such fealty to the powers of individual reason, that if reason is not given its due priority when appropriate—which here includes the basis for female virtue—religious faith appears to trespass upon the domain of reason. That Americans are cautious with their use of religious justifications must impress Tocqueville, for he proclaims that he would rather the clergy be locked up within the church than have them to step beyond it (2:156)

Still, it remains to be shown why the consequences of pursuing private interests are so markedly different between its manifestations as enlightened self-interest and individualism. Specifically, why should the belief that “[an individual’s] whole destiny is in their own hands” (2:105) under individualism, be cause for more concern than, say, the skepticism and pursuit of material welfare that can still flourish alongside enlightened self-interest? Both conditions admit the enlarged agency of the individual and hold the advancement of a very narrowly circumscribed circle of interest as their *chief* goal (if not their only goal in the former case); is this difference not one of degree more than kind? In fact, this may be so. Enlightened self-interest is still *self*-interest and thus not wholly dissimilar to individualism in its focus on the individual. The key distinction, and what makes the latter so mortal to democracy and the former so apropos, is the divergent associational habits that stem from these rather nuanced understandings of private interest.

Like enlightened self-interest, which starts as a calculus for increasing personal gain but becomes an acquired taste for cooperation, individualism also begins in the mind with the perceived irrelevance of duties, but quickly transforms into feelings of radical separation from others, beginning with the farthest reaches of associational life—public cooperation—and erodes inward until man is “confine[d]...entirely within the solitude of his own heart” (2:104, 106). Through misconceptions of duty (namely, that none exist), which exaggerate democrats’ natural feelings of separation, individualism eventually leaves no room for shared experience between men. In doing so, not only does it steal from democrats the utility of associating for political purposes—the first cooperative effort to fall under individualism—it also robs from democracy its chance to fulfill the

normative mandate of politics: the improvement of man, as Tocqueville understands it, and by extension, its justice.⁶⁵ He writes, “Feelings and opinions are recruited, the heart is enlarged and the human mind is developed only by the reciprocal influence of men upon one another....This can only be accomplished by associations.” (2:117). Thus, as compared to the less acute feelings of exclusion behind enlightened self-interest, individualism is distinctly pernicious for the social isolationism it creates, the very opposite moral habit of what is needed to achieve human growth and sustain democratic liberty.

With the leading manifestations of private interest defined, and the stakes of these different interpretations clarified, our attention can turn from the danger of individualism to the likelihood that Americans will meet this fate. In doing so, we can see with greater clarity the family’s influence on the habits of the heart. As mentioned, both the mass appeal of enlightened self-interest (though not the phenomenon itself) and feelings of individualism are unique to conditions of equality. Individualism’s ascent, however, appears more effortless, for its prevalence within the human heart lies in direct relationship to conditions of equality among society (2:104); the feeling appears to flow naturally from a state of day to day independence from others, specifically, the observation that duties appear no longer necessary for self-preservation (2:105). On the other hand, the connection of common to private interest—the basis of enlightened self-interest—is less obvious to democrats because it involves effects often beyond their immediate vicinity; moreover, their skeptical natures obscure from them truths they cannot readily touch. According to Tocqueville, the key to inculcating a taste for

⁶⁵ Recall the discussion of Tocqueville’s conception of justice at the end of Chapter II.

cooperation—and thereby avoiding individualism—is *educating* men in the value of pursuing shared interests, for which the American family, as I will show, functions as an important medium (2:132).⁶⁶

Teaching Americans the principle of enlightened self-interest occurs in the family in the same manner with which the Americans learn the value of politics—through personal experience. Specifically, this education comes from the duties that accompany their distinct gender roles. Women, for example, learn this principle from the response of public opinion which requires them to give up the pleasures and freedoms they enjoyed as girls for the good of their family as wives, namely its need for domestic and moral regularity. By sacrificing desires exclusive to their own well-being, American wives find a path to “domestic happiness” and social confirmation alongside the order they enjoy with their family, all products of the sacrifice of private interests (2:212-13).⁶⁷

American men’s understanding of enlightened self-interest comes from the duties they perform as democratic fathers and husbands. As we have seen in Chapter II, the father’s role, including both his rights and responsibilities, has changed significantly since aristocratic times, when he was “the author and the support of his family but also its constituted ruler” (2:204). In democratic times, the former role remains, but in limited

⁶⁶ Education plays an important part in the success of American democracy and recurs throughout the topics addressed by Tocqueville in *Democracy*. In addition to the relevance of American girls’ experiential education, for which, in part, the success of American marriage is owed, education was extremely important to the country’s founding; the prevalence and aim of education among the Puritans testifies to this fact. Citing an early mandate for the basis of education, Tocqueville quotes, “Whereas Satan, the enemy of mankind, finds his strongest weapons in the ignorance of mankind, and whereas it is important that the wisdom of our fathers shall not remain buried in their tombs, and whereas the education of the children is one of the prime concerns of the state....” (1:43). Later, Tocqueville claims that in America “the end and aim of education” is politics (1:330). Given this evidence, the importance of education in normalizing the principle of enlightened self-interest—a doctrine aimed to inculcate moral behavior—should come as no surprise.

⁶⁷ See pages four and five of Chapter I for a discussion of women’s use of enlightened self-interest in the literature.

duration, while the latter atrophies entirely. The tasks that attend this change are labor in service to domestic prosperity, while his family is young, and the counsel of his experience as his children age and become their parents' equals; moreover, each of his duties to family improves the American father's own chance of commercial success. By giving his labor to advance the material welfare of his family, and his time and attention to older children when they seek his advice, fathers do their part to secure a home life that is both materially secure and ordered with respect and admiration, if not fear and authority. As Tocqueville has shown, such a state is a chief precondition for commercial success, which brings to mind the importance of female morality, but which should not overlook the role of dutiful fathers in this process. Indeed, little endangers business more than the greedy and agitated state of society that prevails without, or with disordered, families.⁶⁸ Thus, Americans of both sexes first learn of the connection between private and common interest (albeit in a limited capacity) from the responsibilities they take on in family. These duties are instructed by the natural differences distinguishing the sexes, and serve common ends (i.e. family goods) close enough to home for spouses to grasp their connection to private interest (2:223).

Despite the moral education gleaned from duties to family, the Americans' institution, *as an association*, may seem tenuously indicative of the cooperative habits that Tocqueville claims flow exclusively from enlightened self-interest;⁶⁹ after all, one of the first consequences of individualism is an emotional entrenchment in which democrats

⁶⁸ On Tocqueville's view, the European family provides the appropriate (though converse) example of the connection between domestic order and public tranquility. He writes, "While the European endeavors to forget his domestic troubles by agitating society, the American derives from his own home that love of order which he afterwards carries with him into public affairs" (1:315).

⁶⁹ That is, the fact that the Americans work cooperatively as a family seems weakly linked to the same habit in public life.

settle into exclusive spheres of friends and family (2:104); moreover, America appears to abound in these cliques. Yet, it would be wrong to infer the prevalence of individualism there solely upon this evidence. On the contrary, the private circles in which Americans find themselves signify a more benign, and on Tocqueville's view natural source—robust *public* associations (2:227). What may seem counterintuitive comes from the following observation: as Americans increasingly engage each other as social equals, fewer and fewer forms exist with which to distinguish individual men. For this purpose, private life takes on the function that class held in aristocracies and an abundance of cliques arise to distinguish friends from simple compatriots (2:227). Thus, the presence of exclusive circles in which Americans focus their private interests is not indicative of individualism there, for on Tocqueville's own rationale this would have to be preceded by the disengagement from public life that accompanies this process, a feature of society contrary to the Americans' experience.⁷⁰

What Tocqueville finds in terms of Americans' associational life is every indication that they have imbibed the principle of enlightened self-interest and applied it to both their public and political endeavors. It is difficult to know the order or the primacy of these two venues of association, for each exerts a reciprocal effect on the other (2:123). However, it is clear that they are a product of the same revelation, and one that betrays Americans' long experience with democracy, namely, the understanding that the independence that equality begets is accompanied by individual weakness in a society

⁷⁰ It is worth mentioning Tocqueville's often challenging use of "private," "public" and "political." While I hesitate to claim a complete understanding of these different terms, it appears that he gives "public" a place distinct from "political." This may confuse contemporary readers who may view them as synonymous, or nearly so. However, as Tocqueville opens Chapter V of Book II in Volume II, he takes pains to distinguish between public and political associations, the former being those exclusive to life beyond private coteries but also outside of cooperation for political ends. Moral, religious and philanthropic associations all occupy this category (2:114).

with few established forms protecting private persons (2:185).⁷¹ In an effort to protect their cherished self-sufficiency, the Americans have adopted the principle of enlightened self-interest in response to their time spent living as equals which “[has taught] them that although they do not habitually require the assistance of others, a time almost always comes when they cannot do without it” (2:185).

In public affairs, Americans associate for almost every purpose as they can see, by the aforementioned truth, the importance of strength in numbers. However, such endeavors are naturally challenging to maintain for the very same reason: a multitude must work in concert because each is so individually powerless (2:116). On this point, political associations appear superior, for they quickly present a shared goal upon which many agree, and by associating in such large numbers, democrats more fully grasp the power of cooperation (2:124); yet despite the edificatory power of political associations, their public counterparts appear even more fundamental, for as Tocqueville notes, citizens can live well privately without associating for political purposes, but “civilization itself would be endangered” if men never acquired the habit in their day to day lives (2:115); in contemporary terms, the former associations ensure America’s democratic *state* while the latter protects its *nation*.

The Americans exemplify Tocqueville’s belief that if democrats can be convinced that cooperation is in their own best interest, they will soon learn, upon testing this theory, the full extent to which it is true. Moreover, by normalizing the principle of enlightened self-interest, they have outwitted their own self-serving natures, for through this process, calculated self-interest becomes instinctive sympathy, the acknowledgment

⁷¹ In aristocracies, of course, these protections came in the form of classes, and the duties incumbent upon them.

of a shared fate, and ultimately, recognition of duties between equals who need each other to maintain their freedom (2:112). Most importantly, this recognition precludes individualism by correcting the fallacy that equality renders democrats fully self-sufficient and thereby deprives despotism of its surest means—human dissociation.⁷² To the extent that the democratic family supports this understanding, the association merits its greatest praise, even if a full appreciation of enlightened self-interest is reserved for public life and politics.

Concluding Thoughts

As we take a final look at the family's influence on democracy, its virtues become clear in light of Tocqueville's greatest fear—the ascendancy of democratic despotism. In one respect, this final crisis highlights America's first confrontation between the order and morality of New England families and the materialism of Virginia's mercenaries: Like the legacy of the Virginia founding, the despotism that democracies may one day face evinces little evidence of family and none of the influence of women. Save for the mention of children—which in this case represent the limit of sympathy under widespread individualism—we have no indication that women exist, much less that they have left their mark on society.

There is no sign of female temperance, or the pursuit—through parenthood—of immaterial success among a multitude who ceaselessly endeavor to “glut” themselves on “the petty and paltry pleasure of life” (2:336). The enlightened self-interest that women model as courageous wives and selfless mothers is likewise absent a populous who exists in and for themselves alone (2:336). The morality with which democratic women inform

⁷² A fuller account of democratic despotism comes in the section that follows.

skepticism, temper materialism and preempt individualism—endeavors that help protect republican government—is nowhere to be seen in this despotic, “tutelary power” (3:336). Worst of all, the strength of will that women develop as girls, model as wives, and ultimately teach to men, is replaced by the worst possible civic disposition—apathy, which is indulged by a society that, in Tocqueville’s words “would be like the authority if a parent if, like that authority, its object was to prepare men for manhood; but it seeks, on the contrary, to keep them in perpetual childhood” (2:336).

Under democratic despotism, the family’s natural sympathies and moral influence are replaced by the nanny state, whose imperious coddling “circumscribes the will within a narrower range and gradually robs a man of all the uses of himself” (2:337), most importantly, his ability to remain free. When considered in this light, the contribution of American families to avoiding such conditions is remarkable. Despotism, Tocqueville claims, is not congenital to democracies, but rather it comes with age; and while Tocqueville is clear that this fate is not assured, it must remain a “salutary fear” (2:348) in the minds of all who wish to preserve liberty in democratic times.

If we look closely, we find that the family’s virtue to democratic freedom lies in the acknowledgment of natural and complementary differences between the sexes—differences that in America bring equal respect to the sexes. Yet the differences acknowledged in the family are unlike those of aristocratic classes, both in their genesis (natural in the former case, conventional in the latter) and in their remedial effect on democracy, for Tocqueville says, “the object is not to retain peculiar advantages that the inequality of conditions bestows upon mankind, but to secure the new benefits which

equality may supply” (2:352). On this point, the democratic family, a product of the novel state of equality, is one such asset.

I would be remiss, however, if I allowed the family in *Democracy* too much explanatory power without raising potential qualifications. One such point regards my presentation of women and Christianity; while Tocqueville is clear that female morality surpasses that of men’s, I may have overextended the idea that morality—in particular sexual morality—defines Christianity so much so that American women become the greatest representations of religion. While women do model certain tenets of Christianity in a way that, I believe, is not captured by the sermons of American clergy (i.e. by *living* Christian mores) whether such action represents Christianity, or simply the morality often associated with it, is an important question. Here, of course, what constitutes Christianity is key, and presents a sharper point for reflection: Is Tocqueville’s emphasis on Christian *morality* (as opposed to divine grace) the best measure of the religion generally, or simply characteristic of the 19th Century Christianity he witnessed in New England.⁷³ Admittedly, my ability to settle this issue is lacking, nevertheless the question may be better addressed by historians and theologians than by those who study politics, for Tocqueville’s real concern with religion in *Democracy* regards its utility more so than its essence. Thus, whatever the answer, *Democracy*’s American women play a key role promoting the morals that Tocqueville finds essential to the maintenance of democratic liberty.

⁷³ There is, however, evidence that Tocqueville did not view morality in America as *strictly* utilitarian (i.e. simply a means to salvation) even though his treatment of religion and morals in *Democracy* suggests otherwise. He recognized that men often engage in moral action to celebrate the glory of God, not only to gain His grace (2:133-4). See Volume II, Book II, Chapter IX (That the Americans Apply the Principle of Self-Interest Rightly Understood to Religious Matters) for Tocqueville’s nuanced understanding of Christian morality.

Looking beyond the text, I believe the greatest lesson we can take from Tocqueville's democratic family is the value that difference holds under sweeping conditions of equality. Specifically, it is the sameness of "men, all equal and alike" (2:336) that both failed America's young democracy at Jamestown and with which it threatens to destroy it, in maturity, under democratic despotism. Thus, the retention of difference merits our attention not to satisfy our recent penchant for diversity, but because the dangers endemic to democracy are ameliorated by the influence that people can have on each other when appropriate difference is retained. Simply put, without the duties that difference helps foster, extreme equality (i.e. sameness) leads us towards the dangers of which Tocqueville speaks: dogmatic skepticism, materialism, dissociation, and perhaps ultimately, democratic despotism.

At the same time, we must sanction our differences wisely, for artificial difference today can dehumanize man below the human relations of antiquity. Most recently, a dark chapter of modern American history was opened, and summarily closed, on the very idea of 'separate but equal'. However, unlike the natural difference that Tocqueville praises in American marriage, segregation—and before it, slavery—took its dividing lines from differences that man, not God, ascribed to him self. Based on the tragic outcomes of these institutions, the justice of difference in democracies depends on what we choose to recognize and whether this, consequentially, improves the human condition.⁷⁴

Yet despite a long history of trying to balance equality with difference, Americans still appear incapable of addressing this difficulty; our aversion to affirmative action, for example, makes this quite clear. Indeed, simply raising the issue of difference today can

⁷⁴ This same measure of justice, Tocqueville believes, at least gives the *context* for our struggle with difference—the age of equality—a greatness of its own (2:351).

become scandalous, as Harvard University's Lawrence Summers, discovered firsthand.⁷⁵

As we work within the often challenging parameters of difference today, we should reflect often on Tocqueville's own thoughts on the matter. He writes:

“Men place the greatness of their idea of unity in the means, God in the ends; hence this idea of greatness, as men conceive it, leads us to infinite littleness. To compel all men to follow the same course toward the same object is a human conception; to introduce infinite variety of action, but so combined that all these acts lead in a thousand different ways to the accomplishment of one great design, is divine conception” (2:386).

In the case of family, the Americans of Tocqueville's time seem to have properly understood this principle and used it well against equality's greatest dangers; whether we will do so in our own day, remains another question.

⁷⁵ Summers resigned as Harvard's 27th President after asking whether innate differences between the sexes could explain women's mixed success in math and science fields ignited a firestorm of controversy at the university.

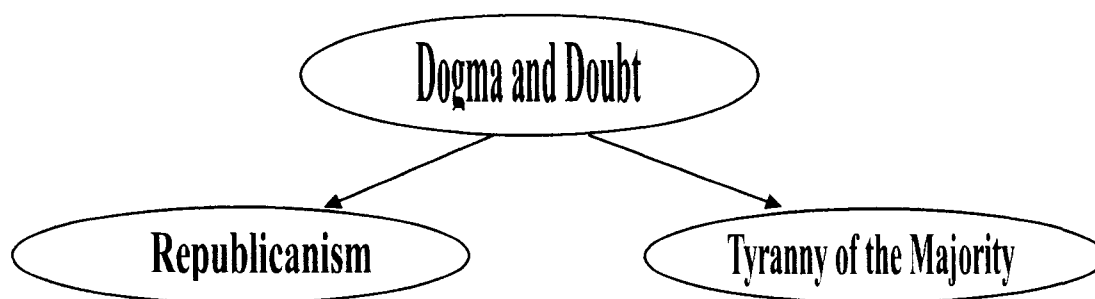
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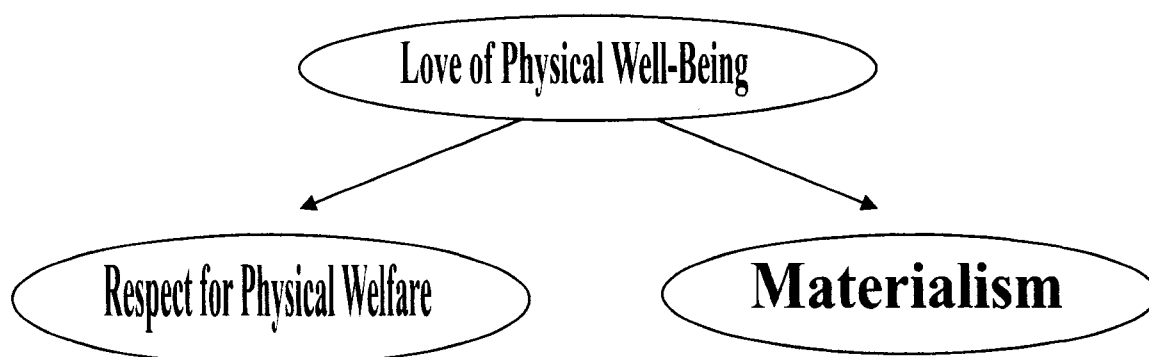
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APPENDIX: CHIEF HABITS AND THEIR POTENTIAL OUTCOMES

1) Mind:



2) Body:



3) Heart:

